PAPERBACK INFERNO

Vol 3, No 6 -- a BSFA publication, edited by Joseph Nicholas, Room 9, 94 St George's Square, Pimlico, London SW1Y 3QY, this somewhat-larger-than-usual issue containing reviews by Bill Carlin, Keith Plunkett, Ian Maule, Janice Maule, Ian Williams and me, plus Rob Hansen's "Sleeve Notes", the "Blood On The Racks" magazine reviews, and a huge "Gernsback Delusion". (There's scope for a piece of awful humour somewhere in there, but my brain's gone blank.) This should be the issue that gets us our ISSN number, so from here on in I'd better make the obvious remark that the entire contents are copyright 1980 by the BSFA on behalf of the individual contributors, to whom all rights are hereby returned. Have fun, and keep that letter coming....

Ann Maxwell --- NAME OF A SHADOW (Avon, 280pp, $2.25)
Reviewed by Janice Maule

This is the latest of Ann Maxwell's "Concord" novels and as such shares with her previous works (The Singer Enigma and A Dead God Dancing) the background of a loose federation of planets in which telepathy is commonplace and the ruling Assembly relies on a group of particularly and peculiarly talented individuals known as the Carifil to fulfill the function of a cosmic CIA. However, the three novels cannot be considered as a series since the author has avoided the all-too-frequent trap of reusing that same characters and locations until all possibility of invention has been leeched out. Name Of A Shadow provides two new planets: each with its own style and beauty, and a selection of intriguing but credible aliens.

The plot is essentially a detective story: have the people of Malia been practising surreptitious genocide upon the population of Vintra, or has Vintra been scheming to make Malia appear guilty in order to have it destroyed by the Concord? Or has there been interference by a third party? The answer is vital to Malia's continued existence, yet restrictions placed upon alien visitors to Malia force the Carifil to rely for a solution on a Sharnn, a member of an even more elusive race and one whose reasons for taking on the job remain obscure until the end.

Although the plot is in itself enjoyable, the real pleasure of this book stems from its characterisation and descriptive passages. Ann Maxwell has a vivid prose style which can at times seem somewhat contrived yet conveys both imagery and atmosphere. One minor flaw, I feel, is that she relies a little too much on coincidence to provide plot development and tension -- the only people capable of saving Malia from destruction, for example, are also the only people who wish to do so. Having said that, though, her protagonists are no mere innocents drawn willynilly into a crisis; they are all movers and shakers whose motives have as much to do with pride, selfishness, curiosity and love as with self-sacrificing devotion to the search for the truth.

Name Of A Shadow comes as a refreshing contrast to much of the SF currently being published, but is unfortunately unlikely to see a British edition for several months, if ever. It's well worth looking out for.

Barrington J. Bayley -- THE KNIGHTS OF THE LIMITS (Fontana, 220pp, 95p)

Reviewing three of Bayley's Allison & Busby hardbacks in Vector 97, Alan Dorey remarked that the novel was possibly a less-than-happy medium for him, thus implying that he preferred the short story form; and, certainly, the narrative techniques of the two are very different, the former requiring its central idea to be cloaked around with such as plot, character, dialogue, background and whathaveyou, while the latter can almost dispense with them entirely and concentrate on a direct and straightforward exposition of its central idea. (Assuming, of course, that you actually agree with the Gernsback/Campbell/Gold-propounded notion that SF is "the literature of ideas" -- a notion which, as you are by now well aware, I completely reject.) Which, ideas being Bayley's forte, is more or less the case as far as this collection is concerned, and many of the stories exist as little more than perfunctorily-dramatised lectures upon some idea or other -- intriguing ideas, to be sure, but presented in too dry a manner to completely hold the attention. But then, strangely, the "genuine" stories don't hold the attention either, mainly due to their paucity of ideas, which suggests that Bayley might well be a less accomplished storyteller than we've previously suspected. Personally, I much prefer his novels to his short stories -- but that is of course a purely subjective response, and hence valueless as criticism.

Octavia E. Butler -- MIND OF MY MIND (Sphere, 221pp, £1·00)
Reviewed by Bill Carlin

If you can struggle past the hideous cover you'll find a novel which is not at all bad. After her first, Patternmaster, I had reasonably high hopes for Ms Butler provided that she could give her imagination free rein; and, although the hand of Roger Zelazny still lies heavy on her shoulder, more of her individual talent is beginning to shine through. At times, however, Mind Of My Mind reads rather like a piece of automatic writing influenced by the ghost of Zelazny's salad days; the days before the idea of immortals living undetected amongst we ordinary mortals became hackneyed and overused.

Its plot hinges upon the struggle between an immortal mutant born some 4000 years ago and his prize female protegee, one of many descendents especially bred to produce a dominant strain of psychic superhumans, and over the course of the novel's 200-odd pages the conflict between them gradually builds up towards inevitable, open combat -- and therein lie the book's two main flaws. In the first place, the idea of two powerful rivals eventually meeting in a climactic showdown has already been used in Patternmaster. Certainly, it is used here to better effect, since the reader is left to assume that the action is taking place in the present day and the pace of the narrative is thus not slowed by inevitably cliched descriptions of a post-holocaust society. (Mind Of My Mind can in many ways be regarded as a prequel to Patternmaster, but is too similar to it to be hailed as a significant step forward.) And in the second place, the narrative style switches alternately from the third person to the first -- and since the first person narrator is the rebellious protegee the reader can safely put a hefty bet on her being the eventual winner of the conflict; a fact which mars the atmosphere of suspense necessary to successfully carry off the old showdown trick.

Despite such flaws, Ms Butler does succeed in providing us with a piece of pure entertainment, and is at her best when she allows her own talent to peep out from behind the Zelaznyesque facade. Although I feel slightly disappointed with this novel, which seems to merely makr time, I look forward to her further development as an author.

James Blish -- GET CUT OF MY SKY (Panther, 168pp, 95p)

Despite its cover blurb, this isn't a novel but a two-novella collection: the title story and "There Shall Be No Darkness", a pseudo-scientific explanation of lycanthropy (caused, apparently, by a hyperactive pineal gland) coupled with a silver-bullet and garlic-laden hunt for the werewolf in question. This silliness is not helped by its setting of a weekend party at a Scottish country estate which, although the story was first published in the 1950s, reeks more of the 1920s than anything else.

The title story, first published in 1952 in John W. Campbell's Astounding

and clearly reflecting the burgeoning Cold War/McCarthyist mood of the time, is slightly more interesting. Its antagonists are the twin planets of Home and Rathe, each inhabited by a different alien race -- each of whom inevitably espouses a different ideology, Home being pro-technology and Rathe pro-mental sciences -- and each spoiling for war with the other. Its plot concerns a visit to the Rathe leader, Margent, by the Home leader, Aidregh, his "education" into the ways of the Rathemen, and his return home to convert his people to the path of peace, but nevertheless contains two gaping great holes: in the first place, the open hostility of Aidregh's people towards Rathe would prevent him from visiting it, regardless of his personal willingness to do so; and, secondly, Margent could hardly lay any advance plans for Aidregh's delegation when he didn't know its personnel complement until it finally arrived. Blish does eventually provide an explanation for these holes -- something to do with telepathy and mental control -- but it doesn't convince; and the story begins slowly collapsing beneath its weight of Campbellian psionics (with which the Astounding of the time was so predominantly cluttered -- we even get an analogue of the Heironymous Machine, a Campbell favourite which had no power source and no sensible electronic connections but which was supposed to measure something called "eloptic radiation" anyway, here measuring something called "voisk radiation" instead), its potentially powerful message of "love thy neighbour" crumbling away to become a damp and ineffective squib.

Robert Asprin -- THE BUG WARS (New English Library, 220pp, £1·00)
Reviewed by Ian Maule

Despite the fact that Robert Asprin seems to be one of the "rising young stars" of the American SF scene, The Bug Wars is the first example of his writings I've read. As its title suggests, its concerns insects -- specifically, a coalition of insect races in conflict with the lizard-like Tzen, warrior-race founders of the interstellar empire. Pretty standard stuff it is too, with only the interaction between the three castes of the Tzen as the war progresses providing anything more than average interest. Perhaps more interesting is the slow realisation that what you're actually reading is a book very similar in concept to Haldeman's The Forever War with a caste system very reminiscent of that in Gordon Dickson's The Alien Way thrown in for good measure.

On the whole, my comments on this, my first taste of Asprin's work, would have to be "unoriginal and average". On a slightly more positive note: go out and buy The Forever War, it's rather more interesting.

Alan Dean Foster --- CACHALOT (Del Rey, 275pp, $2·25)
Reviewed by Ian Williams

I quite like Alan Dean Foster's books: his prose is clear and almost styleless; his plots are fun adventure reminiscent of Heinlein but without the dogma. His novels make a pleasant evening's read in front of the TV with the cat on your knees and are rather like a lot of television programmes -- entertaining, undemanding, totally forgettable.

Cachalot is a planet in his humanx universe, a world set aside for the last surviving cetaceans to develop their own cultures. Man is limited to a few islands and floating towns, and something is busy destroying the inhabitants of the latter. Finding out what this something is constitutes the plot of the novel, with Foster's four protagonists talking to a few taciturn sperm whales, being saved from human scavengers by their orca buddies, and lecturing each other at length about things they probably already know. Foster makes a perfunctory attempt at characterisation by having the lead female resent her adult daughter's sex life and get her knickers in a twist over the hero's compulsive (culturally conditioned) promiscuity; but it's not enough.

Cachalot isn't a particularly bad book, it's just 200 pages too long. If Foster hadn't fallen into the habit of knocking off novels in his sleep, this might have made a nifty novella for Fantasy & Science Fiction (who seem to go for seafaring stories of this type, especially by the awful Hilbert Schenck, who writes like his name would suggest), but try to read all 275 pages of it and you'll be asleep before the cat.

Christopher Priest -- AN INFINITE SUMMER (Pan, 189pp, £1·25)

Chris Priest's first short story collection was Real-Time World, published as long ago as 1974, and until the appearance of this collection one might have felt justified in thinking that he was not entirely happy with the short story form, mainly because the pieces in the first were either all plot and no atmosphere or all mood and no plot. But now, with An Infinite Summer....

The title story was derived (as he says in his introduction) from his research for The Space Machine, and is built on "the sense that layers of time exist, that places do not change so much as people" -- but unfortunately doesn't quite capture that sense, concentrating as it does on the people: specifically, one Thomas Lloyd, frozen in time in June 1903 by a group of "freezers" who roam the past creating bizarre human tableaux for their own inscrutable purposes, who awakes from his frozen moment 32 years later to find that the girl he was with has not been similarly restored. He gets her back, of course, but not the way you'd think; and although this ending may be no more than a twist, and the story as a whole no more than a mildly "different" love story, it works because the character and his predicament are such as to readily engage the reader's sympathies.

"Whores", which follows, is a story of modern lust rather than Edwardian love, and -- despite its Dream Archipelago setting -- largely unsuccessful, its unnamed soldier protagonist goes in search of a prostitute he once knew and ends up with a substitute for VD, and that's it. After this comes "Palely Loitering" -- winner of the 1980 BSFA Award for the best short fiction of 1979, and nominated for a Hugo (perhaps, I think, because of its plugging by (of all people) Orson Scott Card in his magazine review column in SFR) -- a time paradox story (which, like all such, has a couple of unexplained, and inexplicable, holes in its logic) centred around a park divided by a river of flux to cross which is to pass into either the future or the past, and being concerned with a man who spends most of his life searching for a dream but who realises, when he finally achieves it, that he'd already lost it some time before. The manners, mores and life-styles of the characters are those of the 19th century, and surprisingly don't clash with the story's setting, and in fact point up one aspect of Priest's work that (because style shouldn't obtrude) seems to have been overlooked before now: the cool, formal, almost Victorian quality of his prose; a prose that, far from our standard image of such things (derived, no doubt, from the Dickens we had to read in school), flows with a beautiful, lyrical cadence whose perfection shames virtually every other SF writer now working.

"Palely Loitering" is Priest's best short story to date (one I think is representative, just as Tolkien's "Leaf, By Niggle" was representative of his despair at the size to which The Lord Of The Rings was growing, of his attitude to SF in his immediate post-A Dream Of Wessex period), and this collection's remaining two unfortunately fail to match its standard. "The Negation" I passed comment upon in my review of Anticipations in Vol 3 No 4, but I'll add another note here to the effect that it's not, as Joanna Russ said in her review of the same in the June 1979 F & SF, "pure smeerp, a fake-European allegory that could easily happen in a real country and ought to"; for one thing, this (badly phrased) remark ignores the main thrust of the story, since it's not primarily a political allegory about international frontiers and ideological walls but an "inner space" investigation of subjective reality and the probable barrier between that and what we think we know to be fantasy; and for another, even if its political content was the most important aspect of it, the Dream Archipelago setting invalidates it not one whit. "The Watched" is another Dream Archipelago story, one whose enigmas tend to run away with it towards its end, supplanting message first with mood and then with imagery; its placement at the end of the book naturally gives us time to pause and think about what we've just read, but if (like me) you've read the book straight through from beginning to end then the impact of the previous four stories will have dulled its effect. No matter; it's an oddly moving and disturbing story, one which, like "Palely Loitering" and "The Negation", has something to say about misplaced love and thwarted understanding: twin strands that run through the book and are reinrorced by the order in which the stories appear. (As an aside: A Dream Of Wessex has much to say about Priest's attitude to SF, and in this context alone it's interesting to sly connotations of the very name "Dream Archipelago".)

Overall, therefore, An Infinite Summer is a marvellously thought-provoking

and enjoyable collection; one of the very few SF books that no one should ever be without.

Gregory Benford & William Rotsler -- SHIVA DESCENDING (Avon, 394pp, $2.50)
Reviewed by Bill Carlin

Take the standard metoer disaster plot, mix in an unhealthy amount of soap opera, season with a nauseating excess of pro-NASA propaganda, and churn out the half-baked result as though you really didn't care about anything but the money. Voila! You have the recipe for a piece of dross which reads like the first Dallas fotonovel, the role of J. R. being taken by a 30 billion ton rogue asteroid.

Plotwise, this novel contains nothing new, and is executed with such a total lack of style that it fails to thrill even more dismally than the abominable Lucifer's Hammer. Half-hearted concessions are made in the way of characterisation, (female astronauts, homosexual scientists, black marines, and the like), but every token member of every token minority group introduced throughout the tortuous, 400-page long trail of drivel gives the impression of being no more than an undercover CIA agent killing time as an agent provocateur until the next Klu Klux Klan social night rolls around. Large chunks of rather sordid sexual activity surface every twenty pages or so, alternating with sensationalist "newsflashes" from ongoing disasters around the world, which merely give the impression that the authors, not the asteroid, are genocidally burning, boiling and raping millions of wretched Third Worlders in a pitiful attempt to maintaing some morbid interest in the whole appalling mess.

Perhaps the most saddening thing about this book is its total lack of humour; certainly the most frightening is its elitist contempt for the majority of humanity. Any author who cannot see the farce inherent in a scene in which the President of the USA lies in bed with his mistress, discussing American folk music and giving a post-coital solo on a banjo while the world is going to hell around him deserves to be lobotomised. When two authors can write such a scene with apparently straight faces, I can only assume that the operation has already been carried out.

Algis Budrys -- THE IRON THORN (Fontana, 157pp, 90p)
Reviewed by Keith Plunkett

This novel centres around the exploits of Jackson, a member of a small community living around the needlelike Iron Thorn on another planet, and opens with him earning the title of "Honor" by successfuly hunting down a birdlike Amsir. In this hunt, however, Jackson learns that the Amsirs are more intelligent, and his world more complex, than previously suspected; and so travels first to a small community of Amsirs living around another Iron Thorn, and thence through space to Earth.

This first part of the novel is the best, with a well-developed sense of mystery: a mystery that is spoilt when Jackson arrives on Earth, being sidestepped with a quick word of explanation so that the story can veer off into something else. In addition, Budrys concentrates too much on Jackson's inability to relate to everyone else and not enough on getting the background to fit together convincingly; and The Iron Thorn is consequently rather messy and undecided.

Garry Kilworth -- THE NIGHT OF KADAR (Avon, 206pp, $1.95)
Reviewed by Janice Maule

A party of colonists arrives on an unknown planet, having been born and educated on the journey -- but their education has been interrupted before its completion, so they have to start work on founding their own civilisation without any knowledge of their colony's purpose. Much of the action of the novel derives from the attempts of the colony's leader, Othman, to find some reason for their being there; although much of it seems pointless at the time, in the long term it forms the basis of the colony's future.

Kilworth has attempted to impart additonal authenticity to the tribal life of the colony by infusing it with references to Islam, but the effect is merely to give the impression that he was determined to squeeze every scrap of knowledge from his research into the novel, and no real contribution is made to the development of the plot or the character of Othman. The minor characters are

rarely more than ciphers, but since they are all seen through the eyes of Othman, a man notable mainly for his lack of sensitivity, this is perhaps deliberate.

If you can overcome the minor irritiation of the unnecessary Islamic intrusions, this is a readable although not particularly special book. It's better than simply staring out of the train window, anyway.

Robert Silverberg -- THE GATE OF WORLDS (Magnum, 244pp, £1·25)

The Gate Of Worlds is ostensibly a parallel universe story, set in a world in which the Black Death of 1346-1350 killed 75 percent instead of only 25 percent of Europe's population, enabling the Turks to slowly overrun the continent throughout the fifteenth century instead of being repeatedly thrown back from the gates of Vienna, and allowing the then just-established Aztec and Inca empires to consolidate their power and survive into the twentieth century. It concerns the adventures of 18-year-old Dan Beauchamp, who leaves his impoverished family in England to seek his fortune in the Hesperides (America) -- a fortune he doesn't find; after many misadventures and setbacks, he decides to try his luck in Africa instead, and the novel ends with him sailing back across the Ocean Sea (the Atlantic) towards it and a possible bride.

Described so baldly, it sounds quite uneventful, even tedious, and so it might appear to those unwilling to look below its surface. Plot-action isn't important to its theme, and what little action there is takes place on a more personal and (to a certain extent) internal level, the reason for which is hidden in the explanation of the term "the Gate of Worlds" given to Beauchamp by the Aztec sorcerer Quequex, to whit: that at every turning-point of history, a number of "gates" into different worlds open up, and which world results depends on the decision eventually made (i.e., which gate is passed through). The same holds true on the personal level, and in this novel Beauchamp is continually confronted with decisions whose outcome will determine both his immediate and longer-term future -- decisions which, as with we ourselves, only he can make.

The Gate Of Worlds is, therefore, about Growing Up and Making The Right Decisions, but one that scores over other SF examples of the type by its placing of the theme in a more realistic context. Beauchamp's impoverishment is not just a plot device but a disguised statement of that fact that, because they have yet to experience life, teenagers are (in particular, emotionally) impoverished; and, further, his consistent failure to win riches and fame in the Hesperides and his eventual turning away from there altogether is not to be interpreted as a story of futility but as his realisation that, in trying to succeed in life, one should eschew garnd ambitions and settle instead for what one knows one can get.

From this it should be obvious that The Gate Of Worlds is primarily intended for a teenage audience -- but it can be enjoyed as much, if not more, by an adult one (the only one, I fear, that will be capable of looking below its surface). It is, in sum, a thought-provoking and quietly satisfying book.

(Alert readers will recall that last time I said I'd be reviewing this in tandem with Damon Knight's A For Anything. The joint review even got written -- but space considerations dictated otherwise. A For Anything is nothing more than a tediously reactionary mess, anyway.)

Clancy Carlile -- SPORE (Avon, 280pp, $2·25)
Reviewed by Ian Maule

Science fiction or thriller? Spore 7 seems to fall squarely between the genres. Is the contagious disease transforming mankind into raving madmen caused by bacteria from space, US research labs, or foreign powers? Not that it matters; Spore 7 is concerned mainly with the authorities' attempts to contain and isolate the disease, and on this level it works quite well. Where it falls down is in its premise that the area intially infected should abound with characters holding the qualifications necessary to resolve the disease's origin; a premise which is explained, but the explanation is much too contrived. Despite which, and although it clearly isn't a masterpiece of fiction, I quite enjoyed Spore 7.

John Wyndham -- WEB (Penguin, 141pp, 85p)

As you're surely well aware, this was Wyndham's last book, the one he didn't want

published until ten years after his death -- and probably with good reason, since it's not very good. It concerns the attempts of an eccentric English millionaire to found a utopian colony on a remote island in the Pacific on which is already living a race of intelligent, mutated (but fortunately not giant) spiders who have been steadily consolidating their dominion over it and are making plans to spread elsewhere, and the novel can thus be read as another example of Wyndham's perennial concern to demonstrate the precariousness of man's existence: the world made him, and can just as easily unmake him and replace him with something else. At least, that's what he claimed to be writing about, but the trouble with his aptly-named cosy catastrophes is that man is not replaced by something else; his stiff-upper-lipped middle class heros and heroines not only fight back, but adapt and survive, and Web merely follows this by now rather boring pattern through with a few twists to make it look different. And more: given that it was written back in the late sixties, when youthful revolutionary fervour was sweeping the streets of Europe, it is possible to detect in it a thoroughly unpleasant political allegory, viz: the island is an analogue of Britain, the highly educated, socially secure colonists are an analogue of the broad mass of the middle class "silent majority", and the mutated spiders are an analogue of the rude, unwashed lumpenproletariat who wish only to trample down their carefully-pruned rose bushes and kick their elegant, genteel cardboard edifice apart -- an impression not helped by the peculiarly fascist tone of the utopia the eccentric millionaire wishes to establish. On reflection, of course, this rather reactionary political strand has been present in all of Wyndham's work, and has probably gone largely unnoticed for the simple reason that he was writing, in the main, for an audience who shared such beliefs and who, although not wanting them to be in any way threatened or overturned, neverthless wished to derive a vicarious thrill from just such a threat -- always provided they came out on top in the end. The only thing that can be said in favour of this sort of political preaching is that it's considerably subtler than the strident libertarianism of such wolfish reactionaries as Robert Heinlein and Jerry Pournelle (and Jack Chalker, and Ben Bova, and Charles Sheffield, and Lester Del Rey, and....why is the American SF community so full of right-wing thugs and hacks?).

Elizabeth Lynn -- WATCHTOWER (Berkley, 222pp, $1·95)

Reviewed by Ian Williams

"An adventure story for humanists and feminists!" says Joanna Russ on this book's back cover: a phrase and a name virtually guaranteed to make most people replace this book on the shelf immediately. Which would be a pity, since it's one of the best fantasy novels I've read in some time -- if "fantasy" is the appropriate term for it, which I doubt. It has no monsters, no magic, no irritating little people with big feet, and its prose does not run on and on as though the author had taken a laxative: its sentences are short, sharp and controlled, with its characters being finely and sympathetically drawn.

Watchtower's background is culturally richer than but not dissimilar to that of Richard Adams's excellent Shardik; certainly, that's the technological level. Its plot is, on the surface, straightforward: Ryke, the hero, is compromised into serving the conqueror of his dead lord's land of Tornor in order that the heir, Errel, remains alive, but both eventually escape with the help of two cheari (mediator/messengers of puzzling sexuality), who deliver them into the care of the people of Vanima. But this is only a temporary haven, and both ultimately return to defeat their enemy.

This brief description doesn't do justice to this thematically rich novel. Both Ryke and Errel undergo different learning processes about themselves and others. Sex roles and role-playing are important to the book, but are embedded in in plots and structure -- unlike the obsessive-compulsive Russ, Elizabeth Lynn never lectures: instead she simply portrays, leaving conclusions to the reader.

Miss this one and you deserve to be chained to a chair listening to a repeating tape of Lin Carter reading from Thongor Meets The Wookiee-Slayers Of Gor.

Rob Swigart -- THE TIME TRIP (Coronet, 256pp, £1·40)

Those who've read Swigart's previous two novels, Little America and A.K.A.: A Cosmic Fable (the latter reviewed in Vol 3 No 1), will know what to expect from him: an absurdly convoluted and coincidence-prone plot, a cast of thoroughgoing eccentrics, and some acutely funny (yet acutely perceptive) satire of the late

twentieth century Californian cultural landscape. From its opening sentences ("Shortly after she died, Penny Gamesh checked into a Holiday Inn. The marquee under the green sign that ordinarily welcomed bowlers now welcomed PENNY G., SUICIDE OF THE YEAR."), The Time Trip promises to deliver much of the same, but unfortunately doesn't, and this failure can be attributed as much to its subject-matter as to the way it's been handled. Simply put, it concerns the American attitude to death, and the efforts of Barney Gamesh, a computer designer who travels back in time to learn the secrets of immortality from Gilgamesh, to revive his dead wife; and it's Gamesh's sojourn in ancient Sumeria, effectively the middle third of the novel, that diminishes the whole. In the first place, Swigart's sense of humour is not suited to such a historical milieu, and although his ancient Sumerians are made to belch and fart and swear and grumble about not getting laid as often as they'd like, this paradoxically serves to make their culture seem less, not more, real; and in the second place, he begins to regard Barney Gamesh less as a foil for his wit and more as a real human being, in the process inevitably engaging the reader's sympathies in his struggle against the "injustices" of the world and his desire to avenge his loss. The humour of the first third is thus dissipated, not to be regained on Gamesh's return to the present in the final third, and the story eventually fizzles out with Gamesh and his friends, transformed into packets of electrical energy, setting off in pursuit of an insane electronic entity through an international computer network. It would be tempting to conclude that, which each successive novel, Swigart is going slowly downhill but, subjectively, I think that my disappointment with The Time Trip can be attributed to the fact that the impact Little America made on me has never quite worn off, with the result that I keep subconsciously comparing -- both unfavourably and, more importantly, unfairly -- everything else of his with it, and shall therefore reserve final judgement until other, subsequent, novels have been published. (There. Never thought you'd see a critic being as noncommittal as that, did you?)

George Zebrowski -- MACROLIFE (Futura, 280pp, £1·50)

The term "macrolife" was invented by the philosopher Dandridge Cole to describe his vision of giant, mobile, self-sustaining, enclosed artificial communities whose inhabitants (human, animal, vegetable and machine) are seen as the individual cells that make up the whole, and in this novel Zebrowski sets out to demonstrate the transforming effect of this concept upon, initially, human society and ultimately, humanity itself. And fails miserably: instead of insightful speculation we're given so ramblingly sclerotic a collection of witless deus ex machinae that I hardly know where to begin describing it. It opens with a party held by a rich family called Bulero who have invented a magic metal called bulerite, the widespread use of which in the early 21st century has transformed the Earth into a new Garden of Eden; but suddenly the bulerite becomes unstable and catches fire and the Earth is destroyed and the Buleros escape into space and take refuge aboard an already hollowed-out asteroid and install a stardrive and go sailing off out of the solar system into deep space and that's the end of Part One. Part Two is set a thousand years in the future, and concerns the adventures of one John Bulero (a clone of one of the original Buleros, but so what?) who is dissatisfied with his macrolife and so goes blundering about on some alien planet trying to prove that life in such an environment is just as spiffing as life aboard an asteroid, but it doesn't work out, so they all return to Earth to find it reborn and habitable again, with lots of macroworlds in orbit around it, and out of nowhere comes a giant alien macroworld and just as everyone is beginning to speculate on what the union of their minds can accomplish we're stumbling into Part Three, set several hundred billion years in the future, when the universe is collapsing inward to form a point singularity again. (Which fact alone reveals Zebrowski's ignorance; current evidence suggests that it will just keep expanding for ever and ever amen.) Out of his macroworld's union of minds is born (oh God!) the very same dullwitted John Bulero, whom the aggregate have decided is the best individual to guide it and all the other macroworlds through into the next cycle of expansion and contraction (but then if they know what to do, why do they need him to do it?), which he duly does, to find a giant alien agglomeration of macroworlds within an even bigger macroworld which, having been through many such cycles before them, is waiting to accept them as brothers and that's the end, gosh wow. Hardly a demonstration of the transforming effect of the macrolife con-

cept upon humanity, since at the very least there should have been some hundred-odd other Parts between Two and Three in order to show the proper working out of the process; but the plot is a mess and unsuited to the theme anyway, which is expounded at tedious length via lectures by cardboard-cutout author mouthpieces, fake quotes from imaginary books, and the constant repetition of the word "macrolife", which appears at least twice on every page and has only a strongly counterproductive effect (in crude and subjective terms, you soon become sick and bloody tired of it). Excuse me while I go away and lie down to recover.

Jack Williamson -- THE HUMANOIDS (Avon, 259pp, $2.25)

The Humanoids is of course one of those much-acclaimed "classics" of Campbellian SF and one which, unlike most of the rest of them, more or less deserves its title. It's concerned with the implications of man's reliance on the emancipating power of technology -- specifically, robots designed "To Serve and Obey, and Guard Men From Harm", which take their directive so literally that they render man incapable of doing anything. It's reprinted here together with "With Folded Hands", the novelette which preceded and inspired it, and an afterword by Williamson himself which both describes how he came to write it and the ways in which his attitudes to and views of its theme have altered through the years. This, for me, is the most fascinating part of the book, since it provides strong circumstantial evidence that writers write from inside themselves without having -- as so many academic critics seem to think -- first formulated a crystal-clear idea of what they're doing and lining up, well in advance, all the various symbols, archetypes, metaphors, similes and such that they might require (cf. Paul Kincaid's review of Olander's & Greenberg's Writers Of The 21st Century: Ursula LeGuin in Vector 98).

Piers Anthony -- STEPPE (Panther, 191pp, £1.25)

Astonishingly enough, this is not the first of a trilogy; it first appeared as a UK hardback from Millington in 1976, and this is its first appearance in any other edition since. It concerns the adventures of Alp -- a hero not unlike all other Anthony heros of late: big, strong, courageous, competent, unkillable, as thick as two short planks -- a 9th century Uigur nomad snatched forward in time (there was an explanation, but Anthony soon forgets it) to participate in the 24th century game of Steppe, a re-enactment of the history of the steppelands played on a Galaxy-sized "board" where everyone rides around in one-man spaceships called horses and looses off arrows at each other through conveniently-placed portholes. (I'm not joking, although I wish I was.) The first half of the novel consists of long tedious descriptions of the mechanics of the game, while the second half consists of a long tedious precis of the real history of the steppelands, intended to show how Alp took on the role of Ghengis Khan and conquered everything but which actually shows how smugly knowledgeable about Ghengis's Khanate Anthony thinks he is. He probably cribbed the whole thing straight from Peter Brent's The Mongol Empire, a marvellously readable factual study of the same and its successors.... Good Lord, is Piers Anthony really Panther's best-selling SF author of the moment?

Michael Moorcock -- THE ADVENTURES OF UNA PERSSON AND CATHERINE CORNELIUS IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY (Mayflower, 254pp, £1.25)

The Adventures Of.... is an ambitious and memorable work, but one that somewhat defies description. It's concerned with more or less what it says it is, its two ageless heroines journeying forward through the twentieth century in a series of jumps that precipitate them into the midst of its key events -- or almost, since the events experienced by Una are those of a chaotic, continuously strife-torn alternate, and those experienced by Catherine are the personal highlights of a teenaged/young adult girl growing up in different periods of our world. It is, as one might expect, peripherally connected with other of Moorcock's novels, featuring such as Major Nye, Sebastian Auchinek (from the two "Oswald Bastable" novels), Frank and Jerry Cornelius, the formidable Mrs Cornelius and, at one point, the vulture-like Miss Brunner (all from, of course, the "Jerry Cornelius" tetralogy), but this is not the main source of its interest. This derives from the thesis that Moorcock propounds throughout the novel, which is that the twentieth century is a time of unlimited freedom and that,

faced with this, man cannot order his life to cope with the unlimited number of choices thus offered, instead retreating into pointless conflict over the most minor of ideological differences and the unthinking following of anyone who seems to offer even a halfway positive answer to the dilemma. An authoritarian writer like Heinlein would have no hesitation in supplying an all-embracing (and necessarily simplistic) answer, but Moorcock, an anarchist, refrains from such, making it clear that the decisions are ours alone, and that we must stand or fall by them regardless of how right or wrong they may be. (In which respect it shares much the same thematic concerns as his earlier Breakfast In The Ruins.) This of course makes it sound much drier than it actually is, because I haven't mentioned its magnificently camp sense of opulence and decadence; so do yourself a favour and buy it.

SLEEVE NOTES -- Rob Hansen

It is, I suppose, unreasonable to hope that at a time when the fantasy novel has reached a nadir the cover art should be any better. When that branch of fantasy known as sword-and-sorcery has become locked in a cycle of endless watered-down versions of Conan, the quality of the writing so poor as to be only barely literate, it seems only just that the art should be following, locked in a cycle of endless Frank Frazetta copies, the finished results showing little evidence of anatomical knowledge or even rudimentary graphic skill.

All of which makes it rather apt that the first piece of artwork up for (excuse the pun) dissection is that on the cover of Sphere's Conan The Liberator. It's the usual scene of the grotesque and vast-thewed musclebrain laying into those about him with his mighty weapon (can anyone find it at all puzzling that S-&-S fiction has such a large homosexual following?): a piece with all the flair and polish of a panel lifted bodily from a comicbook. Which isn't necessarily to disparage the comics -- after all, Frazetta himself rose through them from such humble beginnings as one of Al Capp's many assistants on the L'il Abner newspaper strip -- especially as the cover, for all its faults, is a better piece of work than the stuff it adorns really deserves.

Ted Tubb's "Dumarest" series, while not exactly S-&-S, has translated a sufficient number of its conventions into an SF setting to attract covers only a few degrees removed from those of S-&-S books. Despite which the covers on the first eleven titles in the series (from Arrow) were good enough to make the books worth collecting regardless of their contents. However, in the long gap between the 11th and 12th books (caused, so I've heard, by a complaint of plagiarism against the first artist), the cover artists changed and Josh Kirby took the helm to produce a series of covers that are uniform in their garish godawfulness. Haven Of Darkness has a smeary red cover adorned by shapeless splodges of oilpaint that could represent anything from buildings to flying craft. Earlier covers by Kirby have shown a rather suspect knowledge of anatomy -- after all, do you know anyone with legs as long as the couple on Eloise, the 12th book? -- and while I've admired his work in the past, particularly his Alfred Hitchcock covers, on the Dumarest books he just doesn't seem to fit. As with most of my reviews this is as much a subjective opinion as anything else, so perhaps someone out there feels differently?

The work of Arthur C. Clarke is most emphatically not S-&-S, and could not be mistaken for anything other than "hard" SF. My own preference for "soft" SF, the SF that is more concerned with people than with hardware, prevents me from enjoying Clarke's work more, but I still find it a pleasant enough, if ultimately unsatisfying, way to spend a couple of hours. For all that, the cover of the Pan edition of The Fountains Of Paradise fits well into the fantasy theme of this particular column. Chris Moore's cover is imaginative, slick, well executed and shows not only what can be done with the form but what should be done. The front and back covers form one wraparound "landscape" picture, the dragon's head entrance to the temple on the front contrasting sharply with the thin, razor-sharp elevator lancing laser-like from the mountain peak on the back, the whole evoking a dark and moody atmosphere of which Frazetta himself is quite capable but which most of his imitators aren't. Good stuff.

Which brings me to a recent publication, a Moorcock/Cahykin from Star Books at £2·95, The Swords Of Heaven, The Flowers Of Hell, a graphic art production clearly related to the comicbook but far removed from that humble institution.

It is also Moorcock's final "Eternal Champion" story, filling the gap between Phoenix In Obsidian and The Quest For Tanelorn insofar as Erekose is concerned (although it doesn't explain what happened to the chalice he was given by Jhary-a-Conel in the Vanishing Tower of Voilodian Ghagnosdiak at the end of The Sleeping Sorceress or how any of this ties in with The Champion Of Garathorm).

Howard Chaykin has in the past done a pictorial dapatation of Alfred Bester's The Stars My Destination (aka Tiger! Tiger!) and worked with Samuel R. Delany on a similar production to this called Empire. He's come a long way from his early days as an illustrator for DC and Marvel comics and has developed into an artist of some not inconsiderable skill. The individually painted panels of this book show imagination and flair, and Moorcock himself acknowledges (in his introduction) that this final tale of Erekose wouldn't have been written if he hadn't been an admirer of Chaykin's work and wanted to collaborate on a project with him. It's a slim but large format book, and worth the money.

GERNSBACK DELUSION

The popularisation of science is a hazardous business, not least because the pace of scientific advance faces the writers with the constant risk that their words of wisdom will be out of date the moment they're committed to paper. (How many of Isaac Asimov's recent columns for F & SF, after all, have been devoted to revamping or refuting something he said only a few years previously?) Popularisers of astronomy seem to face this risk more than others, with almost every second issue of New Scientist containing some news item about some new observation which throws into question our currently accepted hypotheses of the age and/or evolution of the universe (see, for example, the article on neutrinos in the 19 June 1980 issue, published a mere day **after** I began typing these stencils!), and so the reprinting of Lloyd Motz's The Universe: Its Beginning And End (Sphere/Abacus, 343pp, £2·95) could have been a rather dodgy proposition. In parts, it is, particularly as Motz favours a cyclical universe that will ultimately collapse back upon itself and undergo another big bang, whereas current evidence favours a continually expanding universe that will be eventually deep-sixed by increasing entropy (see Paul Davies's Stardoom, reviewed in Vol 3 No 1). Its earlier chapters are the best: lucid and straightforward explanations of the forces (nuclear, gravitational, relativistic) at work in the universe, of the Doppler effect, of quasars, background radiation and early models of the universe, followed by a history of its evolution from a simple primeval fireball to the rich and diverse mixture we can see (or, given the requisite radio telescope, hear) around us today. Following this subtheme of diversity, it then digresses into an account of the evolution of life on Earth, concentrating mainly on its biochemical basis, which, while no less fascinating, does somewhat detract from the book's overall thrust. But never mind; it is in general an intelligent and entertaining work, and those new to the subject will be well rewarded by it.

Knowing that life exists on Earth, however, we can turn to contemplation of the possibility that life might also exist Out There. Edward Edelson's Who Goes There? The Search For Intelligent Life In The Universe (NEL, 172pp, £1·00) is a somewhat racey but nevertheless engrossing account of just that, dealing (again) with the assumed biochemical requirements for the creation of intelligent life, the Drake formula by which one might estimate the possibility of intelligent life Out There, the sheer size of the galaxy and the difficulties of travelling in it, the difficulties of listening and what to listen for, and the types of message that could be sent. Of necessity, it wastes a chapter clobbering the naivete and silliness of the ufologists and the Von Danikenists, but makes up for this with revelations of the political infighting that goes on within the American SETI community for the scarce federal funds available. Edelson is also good on the costs of SETI programmes, eschewing the evangelical euphoria of the pro-space enthusiasts (who don't seem to realise that Project Apollo's "big is beautiful" credo is no longer tenable in these recession-hit times) in favour of a sober pointing-out of the colossal investment of time and resources they'd require, with a very slender possibility of a return on that investment. One thing he doesn't mention, however: supposing nobody Out There is transmitting? Supposing they're all, like us, listening for someone else's signals?

Back here on Earth....a few years ago, Harvard biologist Edward O. Wilson published his Sociobiology, a book in which he proposed a synthesis between the

"soft" disciplines of anthropology, psychology and sociology and the "hard" sciences of biology, biochemistry and genetics, coming down squarely on the nature side of the nature/nurture controversy to claim that all aspects of human behaviour were inherited and not unnaturally provoking howls of outrage from the ideological left, who saw this as a reaffirmation of the political status quo and a denial of equality and free will. As a scholarly text, it was largely inaccessible to the layman; but with On Human Nature (Corgi/Bantam, 273pp, £1·50) he has now brought his case before a wider public, arguing it clearly, logically and persuasively. The early chapters deal with the basics of sociobiological theory while the later ones discuss such human characteristics as aggression, altruism and sex (the latter bound to annoy the hell out of the more strident and idealistic women's liberationists, who seem more or less immune to such boringly mundane things as facts -- probably because they get in the way of their polemics) in the light of the theory's laws and predictions. (These traits have also been discussed, in considerably more depth and detail, in Richard Dawkins's fascinating The Selfish Gene, surprisingly not mentioned in Wilson's bibliography.) On Human Nature's greatest flaw, however, is that in propounding his thesis Wilson is operating in a number of areas alien to his primary specialisation, and thus has a tendency to incorporate into it some more or less discredited hypotheses -- the criminal tendencies conferred by the extra Y chromosome, for example, and Noam Chomsky's ideas of "deep grammar" -- which don't exactly help his case. I don't necessarily agree with what he has to say, but feel constrained to point out that his opponents have yet to answer him in any halfway convincing fashion -- is the nature side of the controversy so lacking in his intellectual equals that it can only respond by empty sloganising and vociferous name-calling?

Reading Basil Booth's & Frank Fitch's Earthshock (Sphere, 327pp, £1·50), however, makes one wonder how life could ever have arisen on Earth in the first place. The term "earthshock" is here used as a catchall for all kinds of natural catastrophic phenomena -- earthquakes, volcanism, tsunamis, hurricanes, global glaciation, global flooding, meteoric bombardment, even the eons-long destruction wrought by continental drift -- and, after a couple of useful and informative introductory chapters on the basic principles of geology, rock formation and plate tectonics, the authors launch into some eye-opening descriptions of all these disasters, interspersing some rather lurid and sensationalist reports of actual events with expositions of the mechanisms by which they occur, making it all too plain just how violent and unhealthy a place to live the Earth really is. The book is unfortunately let down by its rather trite final chapter, which suggests the creation of a World Disaster Agency to cope with future catastrophes and voices a number of pious hopes for man's settling of his differences in order to cope effectively with them; despite which it's a very worthwhile purchase.(particularly as I live on the third floor of a building not a million miles from the Thames, which is bound to flood sooner or later....).

And finally: two books which have nothing to do with science but which will be of undeniable interest to anyone at all interested in the shape and texture of modern politics, and which expose the brand of politics that often surfaces in SF (and particularly American SF) for the naive and superficial rubbish it is. Anthony Summers's Conspiracy: Who Killed President Kennedy? and William Shawcross's Sideshow: Kissinger, Nixon And The Destruction Of Cambodia (both Fontana, 640pp and 467pp respectively, both £1·95) are exhaustive, in parts exhausting, but utterly fascinating (and utterly frightening) investigations of, firstly, the Kennedy assassination -- which comes to the irrefutable conclusion that the murder was committed by a renegade element of US intelligence through its pawns in the Mafia and the anti-Castro movement, with Oswald as its fall-guy and the Warren Commission as its cover up -- and, secondly, the way in which the US government sent Cambodia to the wall in order that it would not be defeated by (in Kissinger's words) "a third class communist peasant state" -- which thus accuses the US of being indirectly responsible for the horrors of the Pol Pot regime and, by extension, constitues an indictment of US foreign policy since the war. Brilliant.

All right, Guess what's been squeezed out of the magazine yet again? Right. Next time I'm going to put the "Blood On The Racks" column at the front, and the hell with space considerations. Also squeezed out were reviews of H. M. Hoover's The Last Star (Avon, 157pp, $1·75), Paul James's Rogan (Magread, 112pp, 95p), and de Camp & Pratt's The Enchanter Compleated (Sphere, 157pp, £1·00), which I'll try to run next time, together with reviews of titles by Arsen Darnay, Frank Herbert, John Morressy, Algis Budrys, Norman Spinrad, Pohl & Williamson, and Poul Anderson.