PAPERBACK INFERNO

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Volume 4, Number 2 -- a BSFA publication edited by Joseph Nicholas, Room 9, 94 St George's Square, Pimlico, London SW1Y 3QY, this issue featuring reviews by William Goodall, Steev Higgins, Janice Maule, Simon Ounsley, Keith Plunkett, Brian Smith, Ian Williams and me. There's no "Blood On The Racks" magazine reviews column this time, in the main because work on the upcoming Novacon 10 (of which I'm a committee-member), not to mention various other things, hasn't left me with enough time for it (much less read the magazines themselves). But the next issue will be out very shortly after this one, and because we'll therefore have less books on hand I'll be able (or so I hope) to produce a fairly substantial retrospective of the year's best stories, drawing to your attention those which you might care to consider nominating for the 1981 BSFA Award. (Stick with me, kids, and I'll show you paradise.)

FANTASY, BLOODY FANTASY

Elizabeth A. Lynn -- THE DANCERS OF ARUN (Berkley, 275pp, $1.95)
Roger Zelazny -- CHANGELING (Ace, 272pp, $6.95, large format, illus. Maroto)

Reviewed by Ian Williams

Not long ago I was frothing at the mouth urging you all to rush out and buy Lynn's Watchtower, Volume One in her Chronicles Of Tornor, but I'm now in the position of having to do an about-face and suggest that you avoid the second, The Dancers Of Arun, like the plague. The many virtues of the first in the Tornor trilogy are totally absent; whereas Watchtower was a short, intense, violent and thematically rich work, Dancers is flabby, flatulent and boring.

It's set a hundred years later and the Cheari, previously enigmatic and feared, are now a respected and loved part of the land of Arun. Kerris, the protagonist, is a despised one-armed weakling living in Tornor Keep who has telepathic link-ups with his Cheari brother Kel who, after many years, comes to take Kerris into Cheari society. This takes up about half the book; people talk a lot but otherwise not much happens. Then a band of renegade telepathic Asechi, barbarian inhabitants of Arun, come to the dancers to learn their mental techniques. There's a bit of misunderstanding and some violence; Kel's boyfriend gets killed and Kerris grows up a little. Basically, I suppose, this book seems to be about two things: communication and fucking your brother -- great chunks of it are devoted to Kerris's preoccupation with homosexual incest, which is probably fine if most of the readership has similar interests.

But, as I said, it's flabby, flatulent and boring. And neurotic.

At least Zelazny doesn't outstay his welcome, neither is he much bothered about intense interpersonal relationships, nor, in Changeling, any form of originality or innovation. It's good old traditional stuff. Well, perhaps "good" isn't quite the word -- "proficient" may be.

It opens with the forces of Good's final assault on the stronghold of an evil wizard. The wizard and his wife are killed but the attackers baulk at infanticide and the infant wizard is swopped with the son of an industrialist on our parallel world. Both children grow up strong and healthy, but neither fit into their societies; the one on Earth exhibits poltergeist tendencies, the one on the other world builds a steam-driven car. The latter, finally driven from his home by people who are happier with nice, normal magic, shacks up with an old computer and -- peeved at his rejection -- decides to impose technological progress on the world by force. At this point the old, good (and now dying) wizard realises his mistake and returns the magical son to his real home to combat his "brother". The rest of the story is the usual old chase, fight, search, rescue, fight schtick.

To be honest, this is a Zelazny potboiler. The characterisation is minimal despite there being only four people in it: the hero (pretty good), the heroine (female cipher, pretty, plucky and vacuous), the thief (self-interested but doesn't let his friends down), and the villain (misguided). The fantasy world is fairly conventional with none of the imaginative touches at which Zelazny can be so good, and the story rattles along for all its (I roughly estimate) 55,000 words. Maroto's illustrations are appropriate, but I'm not a fan of his.

Both these books are, for two such superior writers, greatly disappointing. By now we're used to it from Zelazny, but it's a shame to see a young, potentially writer like Lynn churn out such self-indulgent dreck. I hope it's just an aberration on her part, but considering the rising tide of navel-gazing introspection in American fantasy I rather fear not.

Gregory F. Benford -- THE STARS IN SHROUD (Sphere, 273pp, £1·50)
Reviewed by William Goodall

This is a melodramatic tale of conflict between a Japanese-dominated human empire and the inscrutable alien Quarm. In the fine first portion, which appeared in a slightly different form as a novelette in a 1969 issue of F & SF, halfbreed Ling Sanjen heads a mission to rescue the survivors from a system where the Quarm were apparently beaten off. They find that all the survivors have gone mad, but take many of them off-planet before being forced to leave by the returning Quarm. Sanjen suspects a Quarm ploy and requests that the rescue convoy be quarantined, but his ambitious exec, Tonji, has other ideas:

> "Fleet wanted to study the survivors in depth. They weren't interested in a convoy commander with suspicions and a theory. And Tonji, a Mongol, had ample political contacts.
>
> "We lingered in real space for a week, waiting for the decision, and then Jumped. My trial was short."

Sanjen's suspicions about the contagious nature of the madness turn out to have been justified.

The novel first appeared in 1970 as Deeper Than The Darkness and was revised for reprinting under the above title in 1978. The result is uneven -- the space opera doesn't mix with the serious stuff, and few of the subsequent sections are as good as the first. Disappointing.

Harry Harrison -- HOMEWORLD (Granada, 191pp, £1·25)
Reviewed by Steev Higgins

I almost wish Harry Harrison could have made a better job of Homeworld because, apart from making reviewing it a more interesting task, its premise does have a degree of originality: in order to overcome the energy crisis Western governments impose totalitarian rule to enforce the necessary changes in lifestyle. This unfortunately lingers on after it has outlived its usefulness, and results in the dreadful oppression of the poor proles -- nothing new, but at least it has a topical twist. The new order maintains itself by insidious Security and by distortion and censorship of information, the most graphic example being the rewriting of history. The Orwellian references continue through to the end, when it is revealed that the underground movements and rebellions are deliberately fostered to weed out malcontents. But Homeworld is no 1984, nor even a Make Room, Make Room

-- it is simply a fast-paced SF thriller in which dystopian elements serve, like the sex in bestsellers, to give an illusion of depth whilst providing a suitable backdrop for lots of action, suspense and melodrama.

The writing is ideally suited to this aim, always simple and straightforward, only bad when trying for effect -- on page 7 we are introduced to the fascinating concept of infinite precision, but this, the novel's most interesting idea, is not followed up. And finally, true to form, we find out hero waiting in a prison cell to be shipped out to serve his masters on some "distant planet", determined that his defeat will be only temporary and to continue his fight in the next volume, thus depriving the Orwellian ending of its original significance and making it simply the climax of the novel's series of revelations that Security is far more dastardly than had been hitherto imagined. Lotsa fun for all the family.

Jules Verne -- JOURNEY TO THE CENTRE OF THE EARTH (Penguin, 254pp, 95p)
Reviewed by Janice Maule

A typical Verne novel, written over a century ago for an adult audience but now more suited to a juvenile one. If you've read one Jules Verne novel you've got the flavour of them all, and if you've seen the film of this one you've got an idea of the plot as well. In fact, the book reads like a novelisation of a film: the characters (a mad professor and his stooges) are cliches, the scenic descriptions appear to have been lifted from geography texts, and the narrative permits only the scientific rationales to hold up the plot development. Penguin must be desperate if they really believe that "few writers have ever matched it for excitement and conviction".

Isaac Asimov, Martin Harry Greenberg & Joseph D. Olander (eds.) -- 100 GREAT SF SHORT SHORT STORIES (Pan, 302pp, £1·75)
Brian W. Aldiss (ed.) -- THE PENGUIN SCIENCE FICTION OMNIBUS (Penguin, 616pp, £1·95)

Cover blurbs are of course designed not as accurate descriptions of a book's contents but as selling aids, although that on the back of 100 Great SF Short Short Stories is, in calling it "the ultimate in 'dip-into' reading", almost entirely correct because it really can't be read any other way. There are two reasons for this: the technical and the artistic, and I'll deal with them in that order....

The short short story depends for its effect on the surprise -- the punch, the twist, call it what you like -- that it can pack into its ending, and to read a whole series of such stories one after the other results in the creation of an expectation that the ending of each will have more impact than the ending of the one preceding; an expectation which remains largely unfulfilled, leading to a steadily deepening dissatisfaction and an equally steadily waning interest. The artistic objection is closely related to this: because the short short story exists solely for its ending, it has no room for complexity of plot, depth of character, verisimilitude of background, reality of dialogue or indeed any of the other staples of fiction, and is in consequence utterly superficial and hence untterly forgettable -- and to read them in succession is but to emphasise this considerable drawback. In all honesty, therefore, the book is not suited for anything more than short tube or bus journeys: something to keep you occupied between stops on your way to and from work each day.

Brian Aldiss's The Penguin SF Omnibus, on the other hand, is a far more substantial and memorable anthology, although it now has a curiously dated and in many ways nostalgic feel to it. This derives largely from the fact that the anthologies (Penguin SF, More Penguin SF and Yet More Penguin SF) subsumed in it were originally compiled back in the early sixties, in the days immediately preceding Moorcock's takeover of New Worlds and Ellison's launching of Dangerous Visions and the whole "revolution" in SF in general, and their contents, selected from the British and American magazines of the forties and fifties, reflect what might perhaps be called the calm before the storm, with only a few isolated stories (early Ballard in particular) to hint at what was soon to come. Viewed, therefore, as a retrospective, it's a fairly valuable addition to any halfway comprehensive collection, but at the same time it has to be admitted that a number of the stories (particularly those from the Carnell-edited New Worlds and Science Fantasy of the later fifties) are not at all memorable -- a defect (if it is a defect) attributable to the fact that at the time the anthologies were compiled their true merit would have been almost impossible to assess, due entirely to a perfectly understandable lack of the historical perspective that only time and hindsight can bring. Which is of course the

problem that confronts all those who have elected to labour in the vineyards of modern fiction....

Poul Anderson -- TAU ZERO (Coronet, 190pp, 95p)
Reviewed by Keith Plunkett)

While on its way to a local star system, a Bussard ramship, the "Leonora Christine", collides with a cloud of space debris and damages its decelerator mechanism. The relativistic speeds at which the ramship is already travelling make it impossible for the ramfield to be deactivated for repairs because of the high density of matter in interstellar space, so the ship has to keep accelerating until the medium is thin enough -- which isn't until it reaches the spaces between the clans of galactic clusters. But once the deceleration mechanism is repaired, the crew discover that the configurations of the galaxies they can now reach are not good enough to enable them to decelerate from their vast speed in reasonable time. So on they go through the collapse of the universe and the new big bang at the start of the next cycle....

This is a typical Anderson, suffering from characters who are little more than animated cardboard and a prose style which makes it almost unreadable -- and while the plot does begin quite believably, it soon degenerates into ever deepening levels of absurdity: surviving the collapse of the universe and the next big bang, indeed!

No effort should have been expended on publishing a second edition of this -- the first was enough.

Clifford D. Simak -- CATFACE (Magnum, 251pp, £1·25)
Reviewed by William Goodall

It may be just a nostalgic bias, but I feel Simak reached a peak in the early sixties with such works as Way Station and Time Is The Simplest Thing and has since, to some extent, been cannibalising his own themes without significantly enriching their treatment. Catface, originally published in 1978 by Del Rey under the title Mastodonia, is full of familiar Simakian elements: a rural Wisconsin setting, an old man living alone on a farm, a village idiot who talks to animals, something strange lurking in the orchard.

It is the late 1970s and the old man is Asa Steele, an archaeologist/palaeontologist on a sabbatical. He has returned to his home town and purchased the farm on which, as a boy, he discovered evidence of a crashed spaceship, which he is now excavating. His dog begins to bring home such oddities as fresh dinosaur bones....

There is an overlarge cast of supporting characters, including one Rila Elliot who provides the romantic interest, and they are all somewhat stereotyped. The plotting is messy, which much being treated only perfunctorily, and the ending ressurects a gimmick Simak used more convincingly in Time Is The Simplest Thing. This is hardly one of Simak's best, but I found it quite enjoyable.

Jonathan Fast --- PRISONER OF THE PLANETS and MORTAL GODS (Granada, 190pp and 187pp respectively, 95p each)
Reviewed by Simon Ounsley

"He knew the secret of the universe....which meant he knew too much" proclaims the cover of the first British edition of Prisoner Of The Planets (which appeared in the US under the title The Secrets Of Synchronicity). Now, I like to approach a book I'm reviewing with a fairly open mind, but something with a statement like that on the cover is pushing its luck a little. The line seems to capture the very essence of bad SF: the way the genre's potential for the use of the imagination can be squandered on writing which amounts to nothing more than second-rate thriller material.

Fortunately, though, the novel isn't as bad as it looks. In some ways, it reminds me of The Empire Strikes Back, not merely because its hero also has a bionic hand, but because there is a similar technique of using pseudo-religion and pseudo-philosophy to reinforce a swashbuckling plot. Some of you might prefer the verb "destroy" to "reinforce" with respect to Empire, but though some of the scenes with the muppet were slightly embarrassing, I did feel that the underlying mythology gave a certain meaning to the spectacular adventures, lending them an excitement and importance which they wouldn't have otherwise possessed.

It's a similar story with Prisoner. I found the "spiritual" side of the piece more to my taste than in Empire. In the latter, Skywalker is chosen as a figure-

head of Good in the fight against Evil and takes on something of the quality of the superman. In contrast, Jonathan Fast emphasises that his hero, Stefan is quite definitely just an ordinary person forced into a similar position through no fault of his own, and his powers are no more than those which could be achieved by any other human being. His "spiritual awakening" involves out-of-body flight, which is seen as a threat to the capitalist system; and the big villain is Ultracap, an organisation dedicated to the maintenance of capitalism. Ultracap wants to thwart any attempt by Stefan to spread his powers around; after all, who needs material goods when you're not material any more?

Though this side of the novel is quite successful, the swashbuckling itself is rather less so. Some facets of the plot hinge upon ridiculous coincidences; there is a serious sparsity of imagination and invention; and there's also some cloying sentimentality which in places makes the book read as though it were written for children (in fact, that might have been a better idea). But the pace is fast enough and Fast can put an effective sentence on the few occasions when he takes the trouble. (When he doesn't, he manages some pretty bad ones. He refers to "an epidemic of whispering" and compares the hero falling off a cliff to someone losing hold of their dream memories when they wake up. I'm particularly fond of "In the beginning there was one self-conscious entity", which gives the impression of a being that is rather shy, and unconfortable at parties.)

Prisoner Of The Planets isn't a good book, then, but neither it is an outrageously bad one -- it's just a pity that there's such a contrast between Fast's obvious enthusiasm for the underlying philosophy and his rather lacklustre approach to his plot.

Mortal Gods is, overall, much of the same. It's the story of Pr man Nick Harmon, who is landed the job of escort to an attractive female alien (with blue skin) called Hali Hasannah, and soon finds himself struggling to clear her of the murders of two "lifestylers", the genetically-manufactured beings who are worshipped as gods. The book has a more promising cover than Prisoner and a quote from Ira Levin, who describes the books as "great fun -- witty, intelligent, thought-provoking science fiction". Hmmm....

Fast's philosophical thoughts are here presented not as a unifying whole but as largely unconnected homilies dotted throughout the book -- sometimes effective but more often trite; and the pace in the early chapters is rather slow, Fast seeming to get bogged down in too much technological detail. The process by which the characters pass through the laboratories without contaminating themselves or it is described in copious detail, for instance -- hardly a matter of any great interest, one would have thought, and certainly not of importance to the plot. "On the way out of the building" we are told, "they relinquished their sterile suits to the attendant, who bundled them into a steriliser." Wow.

Set against all this, the humour, though juvenile in parts, is quite sharp in others. I particularly enjoyed the Rooliks, an alien race with three tentacles ("the third tentacle is for picking your pocket while you are being embraced with the other two") who are keen tourists and inveterate photographers. More importantly, perhaps, the plot structure is much improved over Prisoner's -- there's still a lack of imagination in parts, but some plot twists actually come as a surprise this time, and the whole thing builds up to an exciting and effective climax.

So there are changes for the better and for the worse in Mortal Gods, but the overall mix is very much the same as for Prisoner. Fast is obviously fairly happy with the sort of stuff he's producing and is not inclined to branch off into anything new just at the moment. It's entertaining throw-away space opera, and there is no indication that Fast would want it to be regarded as anything different. At one stage of the novel, Nick Harmon takes a hostage and demands the use of a spaceship. When someone attempts to dissuade him from this course of action, he replies "I have to do what I have to do". Any writer who doesn't edit that sort of line out of his work obviously doesn't expect to be taken seriously.

Alexei & Cory Panshin -- EARTH MAGIC (Magnum, 275pp, £1·40)

Reviewed by William Goodall

There are some books that are just plain awful, and this sub-Howardian heroic fantasy is one of them. Serialised in Fantastic in 1973 as Son Of Black Morca, it consists of the rambling episodic adventures of Haldane (only son of Black Morca, War King of the Gets), a fugitive on the run from the killers of his father, accompanied only by Oliver, an old wizard.

Haldane has taken the fancy of the goddess Libera, who fills many pages with

portents ans strange dreams, and gives the plot a few well-needed shoves by infusing Haldane with erratic magical powers. Eventually Haldane renounces his violent heritage, changes his name to Giles, and goes to live in a nice little cottage with a green door. Which doubtless proves something, although I'm not sure what. I found the book very dull, and I wouldn't recommend it to anyone.

Janet E. Morris -- THE KERRION CONSORTIUM: DREAM DANCER (Fontana, 350pp, £1·50)
Neil Oram -- THE WARP 1: THE STORM'S HOWLING THROUGH TIFLIS (Sphere, 281pp, £1·75)

Big books sell; therefore a trilogy or a series of big books should sell even better....or so must run the commercial logic which in the past few years has provided us with a seemingly endless flood of such, although they're by no means unique to SF. But for one reason or another series bearing the label do seem more prominent, and it's a moot point whether or not the (in Roz Kaveney's phrase) "witless hypertrophy" responsible for the patchwork quasi-novels clobbered in last issue's "Blood On The Racks" column is again the reason, only a vastly inflated scale. For what it's worth, I happen to agree with Chris Priest's demand (in Vector 98) that novels be conceived and executed as autonomous, self-explanatory units and not be so padded or supplemented as to extend themselves through volume after volume of subsequent storyline, not only leading the reader on with the promise of the climax to end all climaxes and instead (or usually, anyway) letting him down with the dull thud of limp cop-out but also rendering it impossible for him to comprehend any one of them without having digested all the previous tomes in the series.

Still, here are the first volumes in their respective trilogies (the second volumes not being due for publication until the middle of next year), taken for joint consideration here because they have certain other things in common as well. Both are genre-mixers, the Morris employing a lushly decadent quasi-feudal galactic empire background for its bodice-ripping romantic family thriller saga of a peasant girl from a backward planet called Earth who gets herself accepted into one of the galaxy's ruling families and slowly claws her way up to supreme power, and the Oram employing a tortuously complicated politically-biased historical background for its stoned hippy paranoid conspiracy fable of a young man trying to Come To Terms With Himself only to discover that he's a key weapon in the endless fight against the Grand Cosmic Plan For World Domination by some secret order or other; both have ramblingly interconnected and wheels-within-wheels plots and subplots with casts of thousands and plot-threads left hangingly unresolved all over the place as a come-on for the subsequent volumes; and both are written in styles that are more or less inappropriate to their content.

To say as much is of course to set up a false dichotomy, to pretend that style is somehow separable from content when in fact the two are virtually indivisible -- what you have to say influences the way you say it, and vice versa -- but the keynote of a good or appropriate style is that it doesn't obtrude, and in both these cases it most certainly does. Morris (to make her genre-mixing as all-encompassing as possible) writes in the sort of archly formal near-medieval high prose style favoured by most of the post (William) Morris fantasists, and Oram (ditto genre-mixing) writes in the same style as that employed by Shea and Wilson for their Illuminatus! trilogy, one that fights desperately shy of taking itself seriously and babbles whimsically on at great length about anything and everything; and both contribute little but to slow up the pace of the plotting to a degree that might prevent one from ever getting involved enough with the books to keep reading regardless.

Which you prefer is probably a matter of taste. Nostalgia for the dead innocence of the sixties inclines me to the Oram because of its throwing around of the the names and fads of the time (but without, it must be admitted, ever really integrating them with its story; the overwhelming impression is of everything being layered on with a trowel), but the Morris does have a certain gawky period charm, one doubtless derived from the admit but neverthless (or so I suspect) entirely rule-of-thumb way in which it deploys the multivariant elements it incorporates. From the critical viewpoint, however....well, I talk a lot about the need to ignore arbitrary genre classifications and consider everything as part of a larger whole called simply fiction, and from the foregoing it might appear that I was contradicting myself. Perhaps; but while I'd like to see more writers taking more risks with their subject-matter in search of this "reintegration", it should, because writing is an art like any other, arise from their own inner needs and motivations (which in itself is no excuse for not smiting out at those too lazy or complacent to

try), and the impression I receive from both these books is that Morris and Oram are approaching their material from a purely commercial viewpoint, deliberately mixing in as many identifiable genre elements as they can in (or so I presume) the hope that they will thus be enabled to cross all the sales-boundaries available. It's not art, it's artifice, and the result is like a partly-cooked stew: lots of indigestible lumps floating around in a thin watery soup that masquerades as the gravy which gives it body. Overt genre-mixing of this nature is most definitely not the way in which such reintegration can be achieved.

Joan Cox -- STAR WEB (Avon, 328pp, $2·50)
Reviewed by Brian Smith

Every so often, there appear books which, by their powerful imagery and dazzling use of language, push forward the boundaries of SF and restore your faith in it. Star Web, on the other hand, has none of these qualities. Where to begin? With the protagonists, perhaps, a crew of stereotypes for whom the word "motley" might well have been invented. Here again, drowning in a sea of cliches for your further reading pleasure, are such old favourites as the Young Man Caught Up In Great Things, his Strong Silent Companion Who May Be More Than He Seems, and a pair of Gentle Specialists In Sensuality And Assorted Vices. Yes, a veritable cast of several, each and every one lovingly cut from the very finest cardboard.

The plot through which these puppets meander is quite simply the biggest collection of shop-soiled devices and concepts this side of Perry Rhodan. In it, we find Jade, an interstellar pilot/navigator of the hyperspatial Star Web, surviving assassination attempts and generally unwelcome attention from the head of the ComUn (a standard galactic federation). Somewhat perturbed by this, he embarks on the traditional Desperate Chase Through The Galaxy in search of some answers and a quieter life, encountering along the way such diverse entities as a giant sentient tree and a giant blue six-legged telepathic dragon as he lurches from deus ex machina to the next, up to the appalling cop-out which passes for a denouement. The prose in which this turgid little opus unfolds (the first half being mostly Asimov and Star Trek, joined later by Tolkien and good old Doc Smith himself) is best described as club-footed, with nosedives into a kind of literary greivous bodily harm. Savour, if you will, the lyrical, ringing beauty of such gems as

"'Remember it, me,' he groan-growled from the couch where he lay curled against the pain riding zoar-dragons along spine and into head"

or perhaps

"The hatch blew like a big hand smacking them against the wall, then trying to drag them through the roaring hole where the hatch wasn't any more"

or even

"Heglit's always silence and always reading or writing didn't help".

This novel is 100 percent recycled dross, pretentious in style and interminably padded out with descriptions of drug trips and Star Web journeys as transcendental as the results of mainlining on radioactive waste. Even the imitation Frazetta cover is straight Planet Stories, featuring muscular heroes, rayguns and (you've guessed it) a blue six-legged dragon. (This is perhaps progress of a sort, as the cover of Cox's previous novel featured an angel in a codpiece.) But, in the words of Dorothy Parker, "This is not a novel to be tossed aside lightly. It should be thrown with great force". Anyone so capable of writing as if under the impression that syntax is the cover charge in a brothel deserves nothing less.

Walter Irwin & G. B. Love (eds.) -- THE BEST OF TREK 2 (NEL/Signet, 196pp, £1·00)
Reviewed by Janice Maule

This must be the ultimate attainment of the bigger and better approach to fanzines: a publishing company issuing a collection of fanzine articles in book form! Mind you, the editors of this book, who are also the editors of Trek, the magazine from which these articles have been selected, appear to treat it all very professionally and would perhaps be reluctant to refer to Trek as a mere fanzine. Nevertheless, the items brought together here are full of the gung-ho enthusiasm of ultra-keen fan worship.

They cover many facets of Star Trek as it appears on TV and as it's been developed since, including attempts to provide a scientific rationale for the hardware; deductions on the background culture of the Federation; character studies; Star Trek fandom; Star Trek fan fiction....the fact that so many topics have been, and can be, included demonstrates just how wide the scope of Star Trek fandom has

become. But the quality is inevitably variable, with the pieces based on personal experience being the most entertaining, although non-Star Trek fans will probably find even these too full of noble thoughts as to how Star Trek can bring about peace on Earth, abolish prejudice and intolerance and rid the world of all known diseases to be genuinely interesting. Overall, the book is only for those as keen as the writers it features.

Alan Dean Foster -- MISSION TO MOULOKIN (New English Library, 280pp, £1·35)
Reviewed by Ian Williams

I hate to admit it, being an Alan Dead Foster fan (well, I hate to admit that as well!), but this is the first time I've ever reread one of his books. The surprise, although "surprise" is probably the wrong word, was that I couldn't remember anything about it. It is, to quote NEL, "the phenomenal sequel to Icerigger", and as such it's pretty well more of the same: true blue Earthmen help protect native hominid sapients from ruthless and not at all true blue exploiters. And, golly gosh, they succeed. Oh, sorry, did I spoil the ending for you?

Enough of that. If there are any media people reading this, here's a hot tip: Foster's books about the young kid Flinx searching for his dad would make a great TV series. Flinx has this minidragon, Pip, but that could be changed to a robot bird. Flinx (let's call him Jim, just for familiarity's sake) could range the galaxy -- populated by man-size American-speaking furry aliens,-mostly good -- having adventures and being helped by an older, worldly-wise secret agent who's trying to disrupt the plans of some nasty lizard aliens who want to take over the galaxy. Pip, the robot bird, can fly around twice an episode (not too costly), zapping the bad guys with laser blasts from his eyes, and at the end of each episode Jim will get a little clue to the whereabouts of his dad. Neat, huh?

Lester Del Rey -- NERVES (Futura/Del Rey, 180pp, 85p)
Reviewed by Keith Plunkett

Disasters at nuclear plants seem to be the in thing these days, whether in reality or fiction. The original version of this story appeared in Astounding in 1942, and this reprinting of a revised version of the later novel-expansion is clearly an attempt to catch the trend. The story revolves around Roger Ferrel, company doctor at a nuclear plant used both to generate power and to produce artificial isotopes. A minor accident sets off a political storm and to save the plant from possible closure a new job is rushed through, using an untested process which of course goes wrong. The resulting destruction of the conversion chambers releases a large quantity of Isotope R, which quickly decays into something violently unstable, and some means to dispose of it before a national disaster strikes has now to be found....

Most of the atomic physics involved in all this is fairly credible, but the medical science deployed makes the treatment of radiation effects seem a little too easy. It's nevertheless a good suspense thriller, but that's all, since it lacks everything else you'd normally expect from a novel.

Jeffrey A. Carver -- STAR RIGGER'S WAY (Arrow, 237pp, £1·25)
Reviewed by Brian Smith

This space opera, Carver's first novel, is an average example of the quest story, concerning starship pilot Gev Carlyle's search for the scattered ex-members of the gestalt-crew of which he was once part. His obsessive longing to find them again stems from an accident which leaves him the only survivor of his current crew, requiring him to throw in his lot with a similarly beset cat-like alien (whose resemblance to a kzin is presumably the reason for the gratuitous reference to Larry Niven on the back cover). The trail leads him through unlooked-for love, treachery, danger and a variety of colourful worlds in his search for the idealised past. Business as usual.

Carver's style is adequate, with occasional brave attempts at poetic imagery. The plot is derailed and forcibly rescued a few times, but saved from mediocrity by the character of Carlyle, unusually complex for books of this type even if somewhat given over to self-pity, and by the convincing depiction of the alien (more so, in fact, than some creations of the aforementioned Mr Niven). The device of starflight via man-ship linkage and sensory extension is also carried off with confidence, but it's too slight a work on which to judge Carver's full potential. Only time will tell if he is just another hack with a few good ideas, or a promising newcomer merely suffering from inexperience.

DIAMONDS AND RUST

Stanislaw Lem -- THE CYBERIAD: FABLES FOR THE CYBERNETIC AGE (Avon, 236pp, $2·50)
Larry Niven -- TALES OF KNOWN SPACE (Futura, 238pp, £1·35)
Fredric Brown -- SPACE ON MY HANDS (Bantam, 239pp, $1·95)
J. G. Ballard -- THE VENUS HUNTERS (Granada, 144pp, 95p)
Gene Wolfe -- THE ISLAND OF DOCTOR DEATH AND OTHER STORIES AND OTHER STORIES (Pocket, 410pp, $2·95)

It's held by many critics that SF owes more to the short story than it does to the novel, but this, I feel, is highly debateble. Back when the pulp magazines seemed to form its only home, the short story was indeed its natural mode of expression, but only because none other was available or even conceivable -- not even for the serials of the time, which didn't begin to appear in book form until after WW II, and then only in a somewhat limited number -- and in any case the enduring novels of the so-called "early period" aren't those that were serialised in the magazines but those initially thought of as having nothing to do with SF at all, like Brave New World and 1984. The claim is, in other words, a typically magazine-oriented one, and those who (like myself) don't agree with their alleged primacy can't go along with it -- and particularly not now, with the magazines living on increasingly borrowed time and writers' natural artistic desires to create characters and backgrounds rather than just tell a story (never mind commercial desire for sales and readers!) have pushed the novel form to a far greater prominence. Yet the SF short story lives on, having died out almost everywhere else, perhaps due to some magazine-inspired "tradition" conspiring to keep the mode in being regardless of any other considerations; and as said stories roll from their authors' heads so the material for later story collections accumulates; and with five such collections before us, we can but delve deeper into this continuing phenomenon....

The subtitle of Lem's collection gives away his intention right at the start: the stories in it have to be treated not on a realistic but a symbolic basis, although even as such they're too playful to be regarded in a wholly serious manner. They're concerned with the rivalry between and misadevntures of Klapaucius and Trurl, two precociously talented inventors constsntly striving to outdo each other via the building of bigger and better machines to do increasingly grander and more implausible things, and thus have about a rather tongue-in-cheek and at times quasi-satirical air. From all the things Lem has said about American SF, one would imagine that it was the target of this satire, but if so then (for all that the book first saw the light of day in 1967) he's attacking only a historical version of it -- the Gernsback/Campbell school of thought, which held that, given the requisite technological fix, there was no problem man couldn't solve -- and the stories are thus largely irrelevant. Quite apart from which the collection as a whole is too light and frothy to be read straight through; like 100 Great SF Short Short Stories, reviewed earlier, it has to be absorbed in small chunks lest boredom and restlessness soon supervene -- which unfortunately reduces it all to the status of time-passing escapist entertainment, and Lem is capable of much better.

But then Lem's satire may not be irrelevant after all since, with propaganda for the space programme now filling many of the SF magazines, the Gernsback/Campbel school of thought could almost be said to be coming back into vogue -- not, of course, that it ever really went away, although it's never regained the importance and influence it had back in the forties. Then, labouring in the pages of Astounding (which it must be admitted was the SF magazine of its time -- but only of its time), Campbell and his authors forged from the elephantine dimwittedness of Gernsbackian gimmickry what was soon recognised as the consensus view of man's future: that we would develop spaceflight, colonise the solar system, establish dominion over the nearer stars, spread throughout the galaxy, raise up an empire of awesome power and might, collapse into barbarism, but eventually struggle back up to spend the long golden afternoon of our species basking in the peace and contentment of our hard-won maturity. Through their widening of the field in the early fifties to allow the promulgation of different views of reality by writers who didn't share Campbell's, Galaxy and F & SF eventually demolished the consensus altogether, but for one reason or another the future history, the most apt vehicle for an individual writer's exploration of such a rise and fall, remains as firmly entrenched as ever. One of the most popular of recent future historians is of course Larry Niven, whose Tales Of Known Space collects together all the "Known Space" stories that haven't already been anthologised elsewhere, and is thus very much a collection of leftovers. A good half of its stories are plotless and per-

functory one-finger exercises depending on glib little gimmicks for their rationales (with a good half of the gimmicks having something or other to do with, you guessed it, black holes) and, bar the chronology of Known Space that leads off the volume, can't be recommended as an introduction to his work -- although it's interesting to note how, with the passage of time, there have been certain shifts of emphasis within what's left of the consensus. The most obvious example is perhaps the treatment accorded aliens: Campbell, a xenophobe and human supremacist, held that they were there to be conquered and subjugated, whereas Niven, an author who can be said to have derived much of his inspiration from Campbell's legacy, preaches the soft path of compromise and co-operation -- a complete contrast to the militarism of most hard science writers and thus something which imbues me with the irrational hope that one day those same writers might wake up to the fact that death and destruction is not the only course of action: a hope which I feel certain will never be realised.

Not, of course, that everyone held fast to the consensus even when it was at its height -- but if you didn't follow the Campbell line you didn't get published in Astounding, being instead condemned to appear in the lesser pulps of the time and, from the standpoint of history, eventually disappear into virtual and in many respects undeserved oblivion (although, apropos nothing at all, it's interesting to speculate on whether, because they knew they wouldn't make it into what was then thought of as the big time, the writers who sold most or all of their stuff to the lesser pulps actually put their full hearts and minds into their stories). One such writer was Fredric Brown, whose two most famous SF stories, "Arena" and "Answer", have, because they did appear in Astounding, almost eclipsed his other work (although SF actually constituted only a fraction of his total output). A previous collection, Nightmares And Geezenstacks, containing mainly vignettes of a few thousand words or less, was reviewed here in Vol 3 No 2, and from the same publisher we now have a collection of his longer works, Space On My Hands (printed complete with the introduction to the original Shasta Press edition) which, oddly enough, is readable only in the same manner as The Cyberiad and 100 Great SF Short Short Stories: the stories are too superficial, too lightweight, to be regarded as anything more than time-passing escapist entertainments (but then what else would you expect from such titles as "Pi In The Sky", "All Good BEMs" and "Nothing Sirius"?). Those which do have a more serious purpose (such as "Something Green", "Knock" and "Come And Go Mad" are let down by the triteness of their plots and the hastiness of their writing. Still, it's not a bad collection -- but then neither is it a quintessential one; on the whole, I suspect that Brown's novels (particularly What Mad Universe) will survive longer than his short stories.

With the breaching of the consensus and the explosion of new talent in the early fifties, it seemed for a time as though SF was poised for the take-off, for a climb to a position of prominence akin to that it occupies now, but the hopes then expressed were premature and such was not to be (for a deeper discussion of this "failure" I particularly recommend Barry Malzberg's introduction to his and Bill Pronzini's Ace anthology The End Of Summer: SF Of The Fifties, although the stories themselves aren't completely illustrative of what he's talking about); it wasn't until the sixties that the really innovatory and genre-broadening movements got under way, movements without which SF would probably have been destined to remain forever trapped in a cultural backwater. A prime mover in the British wing of this necessary evolution was of course J. G. Ballard, who's now won himself an audience of his own and whose recent collection The Venus Hunters is in fact a partial reprinting (and retitling) of his earlier The Overloaded Man, dropping the then title story, plus "The Coming Of The Unconscious" and "Thirteen To Centaurus" but adding one otherwise uncollected 1969 New Worlds story, "The Killing Ground", and two more recent pieces, "One Afternoon At Utah Beach" and "The 60 Minute Zoom". These latter three stories are perhaps the most powerful in the book, but the others, dating from both shortly before and shortly after the "New Wave" may be said to have begun, are not without interest, although the conflux of the old Ballard, when he was still writing what can in some way be identified as genre SF, with the new, when he now writes whatever comes into his head, and the hell with pettifogging categorisations, does make for a rather uneasy mix.

And so to the present, when -- bar the ghetto drivel of Isaac Asimov's and almost everything that appears under the Del Rey imprint -- SF can be said to have so diversified that no single editor can ever be as powerful as he once was (which is just as well, since what writer of any integrity wants to spend his career writing only what he's told to? I do of course exclude the hacks who work for Scithers at

Asimov's) and, indeed, the genre has almost ceased to exist as a distinct literary entity, allowing writers to follow Ballard's example and write whatever they damn well like. Examples of this new-found (or, rather, newly-rediscovered, Gernsback and Campbell being more to blame than most for curtailing it in the first place.... but these parentheses are getting out of hand) freedom may be found in Gene Wolfe's The Island Of Doctor Death And Other Stories And Other Stories (confusing, but -- look! here I go again! -- for the record the title of the story responsible consists of all but the last three words) which, his first and so far only collection, includes, as far as I can determine, every short story he's so far written and is thus rather like Ballard's The Venus Hunters: an uneasy mix of the old and the new. There's no acknowledgements page listing each story's date of first publication, but I think the older ones can be identified by their rather more traditional plots and situations -- a good example is "Alien Stones", a pedestrian and overlong story about the difficulties of meaningful social intercourse with (surprise!) aliens. The new are naturally the best, and certainly the best written, Wolfe being gifted with the rare ability to paint the most detailed possible picture and evoke the deepest and most complex response with the sparest possible prose -- a vital faculty for the the short story writer, one would have thought, but then SF writers never were noted for their literary brilliance. -- to describe his style as one of extraordinary lucidity and subtlety is hardly to do it justice, since several of the shorter pieces (such as "La Befana", "Three Fingers", "Feather Tigers" and "Cues") depend almost entirely upon it for their effect -- which is in fact their major shortcoming. Although a long way removed from the plotless gimmick-stories which clutter up Niven's Tales Of Known Space, they nevertheless seem to me to be in some crucial way insubstantial: bright fragments with no real core of message or meaning, word-pictures with nothing of any real weight behind them. Then, too, some of the longer pieces (such as "The Death Of Doctor Island" (no connection with the title story) and "The Eyeflash Miracles") seem to be a little overlong, primarily because of (and this, in view of my previously expressed views on such matters, will doubtless surprise you no end) their concentration on the characters, a concentration which extends into the reporting of their most inconsequential and irrelevant thoughts, actions and conversations -- although, to be fair, he's nowhere near as obsessed with them as Samuel Delany -- and which, for all that it does deepend our insight into and understanding of them, also tends to hold up the progress of the in any case very leisurely plot.

Well, perhaps it's all only a matter of taste: some will prefer the Niven and some the Wolfe, but if nothing else the fact that two such entirely dissimilar collections can be published under the same genre label does indicate the astonishingly wide range of possibilities available to those who choose to work in its still-fertile fields -- fields which are of course rendered so by the boundary-breaking efforts of such as Ballard and Wolfe, writers whom I suspect will outlast such as Niven, still grinding away at ground rendered all but completely barren by decades of pulp overuse. And I also suspect that the SF short story will be with us for many years yet, flourishing as other short stories do not -- but then who's to say that the non-genre stories of Ballard and Wolfe might not in some way contribute to the reviving of the short story form in fiction at large?

The end (or almost) of another spiffing issue....but before we close I've few letters to hand which should give me further opportunity to Sound Off about various things (well, I'm the editor, after all); condensing as much as I can into the space that's left, then, here's ANDY SAWYER:

"I've mentioned in letters to Matrix that I'd prefer to see Inferno cover as wide a range of new paperbacks as possible, featuring shorter reviews and aiming at a comprehensive survey of the field rather than taking just a few books and treating them in depth. The place for reviews of more than one paragraph should be Vector. My basic point, I suppose, being that I think there's a need for the BSFA to produce some good bibliographic work and the old Stephenson-Payne Paperback Parlour was the nearest thing we had to it.

"However, you have your own style and you're quite rightly sticking to it. I can't say that I disagree fundamentally with your critical approach -- we may argue about specifics but when it comes down to it I think we share a similar concern for what SF is doing to itself. For instance, your introductory sentences to "Blood On The Racks": there seems to me to be something curiously masturbatory about the process in which a story becomes part of a novel which becomes part of series which...

Fair enough, have a series of stories about the same characters or environment as long as you can keep the thing fresh; fair enough, have what they used to call a "story cycle" (although I was always under the impression that such were conceived as a whole); fair enough, if it's a good idea and it works, then why not extend it -- but too often all this simply disguises a lack of thought. Too few writers really know when to stop, and it seems to me that the SF market forces them into producing either short stories for the American magazines which can then be turned into novels if they prove popular, or blockbusting trilogies a la Piers Anthony; there must be a place for the novel as a unified statement about a singular set of circumstances. Chris Priest's Inverted World did start life as a short story, but was extensively rewritten as a novel -- and there it stopped. The trouble with much of the stuff you mention in "Blood On The Racks" is that it could go on for ever."

Precisely -- and the awful thing about it is that it damn well does go on for ever (or apparently so, at any rate). But for the sake of factual accuracy I'd better mention that I was slightly wrong about Martin & Tuttle's "One-Wing": I've since learned (via a route too complex to detail here) that the novel expansion of "The Storms Of Windhaven" came first, and has been broken down into shorter sections by Bova's reluctance to serialise the complete thing in Analog, instead abstracting a modified section of it as the aforementioned "One-Wing". But this information wouldn't otherwise have been generally available and the impression that it's been constructed from a series of shorter pieces will thus remain -- quite apart from which I don't think that this in any way alters my basic point about the story in question adding nothing to the original, and simply retreading its not-especially-inspiring theme in an even more limp and lacklustre manner. As you so rightly claim, "too few writers really know when to stop".

Otherwise....oddly enough, I don't exactly disagree with your contention that there's a need for the BSFA to perform some sort of bibliographic service in addition to its more important critical one -- but we have to keep things in proportion. For one thing, the sheer volume of stuff that appears in any two month period (even in this time of economic recession) is usually more than we have room for; for another, the effort of trying to read it all will be more than anyone can take (for any extended period of time, at least, which is of course why I almost had to give up); for a third, to even attempt to find room for everything would result in the rather ridiculous situation of us giving almost as much space to the new Doc Smith as the new Ursula LeGuin (we could confine ourselves to simply summarising their plots, but such will tell you nothing about a book except what happens in it -- hardly criticism, and certainly not very interesting); and for a fourth....well, as things stand at present (because long-term change is in the air), Inferno is more or less the paperback reviewing arm of Vector, a part of a larger whole, and if it is thus to make any worthwhile contribution to the larger debate cannot but adopt and maintain the same critical criteria and concerns of that debate: anything less would be a cop-out.

Damn. Running out of room just as things were getting interesting. Next time, assuming I can edit his letter(s) down to printable length, a variety of thoughts on a variety of topics from Arnold Akien, plus a condensation of my exchange of correspondence with Paul Smith about whether or not SF should "reintegrate" with the mainstream from which it sprang, plus whatever missives You Lot Out There may care to pen. In the meantime, groove to this annotated list of the other books that fell into my lap during the past couple of months:

Poul Anderson -- TRADER TO THE STARS (Granada, 144pp, 95p) & SATAN'S WORLD (Corgi, 223pp, £1·25): two reprints, the former a collection of stories about interstellar trader Nicholas van Rijn and his ace spaceship pilot David Falkayn, and the latter a novel about interstellar etc. and his ace etc.; the collection is okay, but the novel is a good example of the witless hypertrophy of which Andy and I have been complaining: a novella transformed into a further source of income by the addition of a chunk of completely plotless padding, apparently written while Anderson's brain was out to lunch. // Michael Moorcock -- THE TRANSFORMATION OF MISS MAVIS MING (Star 159pp, 95p): another of the sidestream supplements to his "Dancers At The End Of Time" series, less absorbing or interesting than most due to its revolving around the eponymous heroine, one of the imprisoned time-travellers whose personality has insufficient depth to successfully carry the book its full distance. // W. A. Harbinson -- GENESIS (Corgi, 613pp, £1·75): remorseless bestsellerish rubbish about evil governments concealing The True Nature Of UFOs from the anxious public; cultists will love it, everyone else will find it embarrassing in the extreme.