PAPERBACK INFERNO

ISSN 0260-0595 Price 15p

Volume 6 Number 3 -- a BSFA publication edited by Joseph Nicholas (usual address: 22 Denbigh Street, Pimlico, London SW1V 2ER, United Kingdom), the reproduction of which will, with any luck, be much better than last time. I don't know what went wrong, but you have my sincerest apologies for it.... This issues contains reviews by (once again) almost everyone who's ever written for the BSFA and is, you'll note, a couple of pages longer than usual (in a probably vain attempt to clear up the more outstanding bits of the backlog). The entire contents are copyright 1982 by The BSFA Ltd on behalf of the individual contributors, to whom all rights are hereby returned.

BLOOD ON THE RACKS -- Andy Hobbs

Writing reviews of the American SF magazines is a subjective rather than an objective task. To begin with, both Analog and Isaac Asimov's SF Magazine have each published ten issues in the period under review here (January 1982 to November 1982). That's at least 120 stories, although I haven't counted them. It is impossible, within the confines of this column, to review them all. My job, therefore, entails a distillation of the magazines' contents into manageable chunks from which critical conclusions can be drawn and then purveyed to you, the reader.

Writing this review from this side of the Atlantic leads, in addition, to subjectivity as regards the question of content and subject-matter. These magazines are American and, published, for the American market, appeal to a different moral sensibility than is found in this country. It is impossible for the typical British -- or European -- critic to be objective when discussing the literature of another culture; it is even more impossible when the "literature" under review is that branch of science fiction purveyed by Analog and IAsfm (sic).

Davis Publications Inc. are responsible for both these magazines, as is witnessed by the numerous cross-referenced adverts that appear in each. Both are digest size (slightly smaller than A5), and have thirteen issues a year. They are the two biggest selling magazines in America, Omni excluded. These are the facts of the matter; in essence; they are two completely different magazines, and would appear to attract different audiences.

Analog rather rests on its reputation as the one-time Astounding, edited by John W. Campbell. Its format is still rather similar as well. Each

issue commences with a meaty, but ponderous, editorial by Stanley Schmidt; his style is rambling and at times inconclusive, and it seems that this is the way he likes his stories. There are "science fact" articles that at times lean towards the pseudo-science of Von Daniken, and at time veer away towards the other extreme with a mass of graphs and data to illustrate, for example, the possible way in which the Moon was created. Either G. Harry Stine or Jerry Pournelle contribute a column entitled "The Alternate View" in which a kind of retrospective ball-gazing act sets the world to rights:

> "Although many nations can't produce enough to feed their own populations, they're beyond help from the outside because they're not willing to give up their traditional ways. It's not physically or financially possible for the outside world to support their ways."
>
> (G. Harry Stine, October 1982)

These fatuous extrapolations from past history are, to say the least, morally questionable.

Analog also has the obligatory out-of-date letter column, in which unaminous praise is heaped upon magazine and staff alike. There is also a book review section, in which bland books are given bland reviews; and a thing called a biolog appears in each issues in which little-known -- on this side of the Atlantic, at least -- SF personalities are given sycophantic praise by one Jay Kay Klein.

Back to the book reviews....although most are mercifully short and by a man named Tom Easton, there was a come-back during the year by Spider Robinson. He reviewed two books, High Tension by Dean Ing and Friday by Robert Heinlein:

> "Friday is probably the best novel that Robert Heinlein has published in the last ten years, and Friday, its protagonist and narrator, is one of his most unique and lovable characters. ... Heinlein has been creating truly original characters, unprecedented in literature, for over forty years now...."
>
> (mid-September 1982)

His reviews take up ten pages.

Analog is, though, primarily a fiction magazine, and it does make some token efforts to live up to this label. There are, to be honest, no real successes....but we'll get back to it in a moment.

IAsfm, meanwhile, is Gosh-Wow Golden Age by Good-Doctor Humour. Visually attractive (especially after George Scithers left and Kathleen Moloney changed the layout), it is as inadequate as its stable-mate. Here, the editorial comes from the sickly-sweet mind of Isaac Asimov himself, and his philosophy seems to be good-natured mindless entertainment for the masses. There is a crossword -- which is totally incomprehensible in places, due to the culture abgle again -- as well as the amazingly puerile little quizzes that Martin Gardner does every month. There are book reviews -- better, though not by much, than Analog's -- and the most incredible letter column that it has ever been my misfortune to come across:

> "As (an avid SF reader) I would like to express to you my deepest thanks for collecting and publishing such tremendous works in each and every issue of your magazine...."
> "Your magazine has the effect of renewing my passion for life...."
> "IAsfm is not really a (sic) SF magazine. It is a correspondence course in creative writing, and is far better than my previous courses...."
> "I try all the puzzles and read all the poetry and puns. These are especially amusing to me as I have a very sick sense of humour...."
>
> (September 1982 -- all come from different letters!)

The letter column of IAsfm is nothing less than a device for the self-gratification of the editors, writers and readers. Like Analog's, it is also months out of date, and its relevance is reduced to zero.

IAsfm is, though, primarily a fiction magazine, though it seems to make little effort to live up to this label. Which, unfortunately, brings this review inexorably round to the fiction of the two magazines.

The majority of it is dire, the rest worse. There is no gem to be un-

covered, with gasps of amazement, amongst this collection of stories and (in Analog) serialisations. There are no little masterpieces occupying an unfamiliar place in the pages of these magazines. They have decided on their editorial demands and their editorial criteria and by God they stick to them.

Looking at the content of the stories, I have to subjective. American culture has been diverging from ours for the past few centuries, and even the language is beginning to sound foreign to us. Different moral standards and cultural aims have created a new race from the amorphous mass of humanity that has been travelling west over the past five hundred years. The stories in these magazines reflect many of the less realistic aspects of the Great American Dream: the brainless chump of a hero is always victorious; aliens always have an obvious weakness that can be exploited to extricate the hero from a difficult situation; Uncle Sam mentality and apple-pie morality are all-important; the American Dream will live forever.

Yes, there are authors that still write stories about humans-versus-aliens. In James White's "The Scourge" (Analog, January), human logic and ingenuity is enough, and the plight of the human in alien circumstances is never realised:

> "He wondered sickly whether his Earth-human legs could get him to the entrance before the longer Teldin limbs....could head him off. His own weapon was still in the backpack, and pitifully inadequate anyway."

The pacification of the aliens follows, as does their eventuall acceptance by the Federation.

There is also trouble on Earth, with rising discontent, Fundamentalism, and general disorder. In Sam Nicholson's "He Who Fights And Runs Away", the criminals are being fought from the huge space wheels that contain "civilised man". Organised crime is the target:

> "Hpwever, the kids were spacemen. They would remember him only as a damn fool trying to save a self-destructing species."
>
> (Analog, mid-September 1982)

The brainless chump -- honestly, he is absolutely incredible! -- saves the integrity of the species once again. And, of course, he survives to tell the tale.

IAsfm also has the single hero outwitting the alien invasion force. In "Renascence", by Mary Kittredge (March), the hero has just returned after doing "battle" with the enemy:

> "'We'll all teach,' Judith said. 'You learned something about them. You'll remember. We'll teach, and we'll tell everyone else to teach.... you beat them, Scripps. You're the only one.'"

As well as the themes outlined above -- and may I point out that every hero is either from the USA or, if Earth has been long forgotten, would have been from the USA -- there are the usual crop of dolphin stories. Here, the intelligent use of dolphins, and the use of intelligent dolphins, is exploited in every possible way. There are also time travel stories, machine intelligence stories, an abundance of awful pun stories, computer game stories, and video game stories. The settings are, by name, quite diverse, but in reality they are roughly the same, falling into the categories outlined earlier.

That is the content, but what of the style? How are these magazines faring on the literary front, in terms of characterisation, plot, setting, description and good use of the English language? Here is a lengthy quote from Isaac Asimov, taken from the end of his editorial in the February 1982 IAsfm:

> "Let me tell you what I feel about good writing. It's important to be a good writer if you want to make a living writing, so good writing is important to me for that reason. It's important to be a good writer if you wish to make even an occasional sale: and George, Shawna and I want as many of you as possible to make at least an occasional sale for the sake of the magazine; and that makes good writing important to all three of us.
>
> "But there is more to it than even that. Every one of us reads far

more than he will ever write. As you know, I write (it sometimes seems to me) every waking moment; yet even I read far more than I write. And for all of us, reading good writing is an enormous pleasure, while reading bad writing is a painful job.

"What's wrong(,) then, with wanting to enjoy life?"

What indeed!

Both magazines have, over the past year, published stories by well-known authors as well as newcomers. In their pages you will find material from Brian Aldiss, Robert Silverberg, Gene Wolfe, James White, Isaac Asimov, Damon Knight, Gregory Benford, Robert Young, Barry Malzberg, Ben Bova, Larry Niven, and so on. Material from the newcomers, like Somtow Sucharitkul, Tony Richards, Donald Kingsbury, Connie Willis and Scott Sanders, is abundant. Surely the established names should be leading the way, with the new writers trying to match them pace for pace? Surely the environment in these magazines should be invigorating and lively, seeking out new ideals of style, new heights of thoughtful and imaginative writing?

It seems that this is not the case. There seems an unwritten law that the pinnacle of success is achieved solely by virtue of the basic idea encapsulated within the story; the characterisation is left wanting, and the style is pedestrian. In both Analog and IAsfm, the lead balloon of the Golden Age of Science Fiction is perpetuated into the present. I began to suspect that certain of the better-known authors had managed to hoodwink the editors into publishing works that subtley took the piss out of their very magazines -- in some instances, this has to be the case, as the stories are so bad as to be indescribable, and people like that should know better. (Still, if the magazines can splash their names across the cover, it's all money in the till, isn't it?) But, on reflection, it seems that the majority are playing it straight....

So: what merit is there in Analog and Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine? Are they in any way helping the development of science fiction? The answer is an emphatic no. Have they introduced new and challenging ideas that can be explored and expanded? The same no. As magazines, have they produced a totality that is stimulating and enjoyable? No.

Most important of all, have either of them produced well-written, well-reasoned, and thought-provoking fiction? It is a sorry state of affairs when the answer to this last question is an unequivocal no.

Analog and IAsfm are throwbacks in disguise, unmistakable products of the Golden Age of SF, unrelenting in their search for "SF as it should be writ: the American Way". It is a travesty when the two most powerful SF magazines in the English-speaking world can get away with publishing such unadulterated rubbish as they have this year. They have tipped the balance heavily in the direction of utter trash, and it is a balance that must be redressed. Somehow. Which is a very good question....

Julian May -- THE GOLDEN TORC (Pan, 377pp, £1.75)

Reviewed by Sue Thomason

Reading this second volume in "The Saga of The Exiles" produces a mixture of sympathy and embarrassment, like watching an ill-formed premature baby feebly struggling for life. Perhaps brutal treatment is kinder in the long run.

The book does have some advantages over its predecessor -- it's shorter, for instance. And it does have one very good idea: a complete disaster. Both because it is a disaster, and a potentially exciting one -- the breaking of the land barrier between the dry basin of the Mediterranean Sea-to-be and the Atlantic Ocean; a genuine Pliocene geological event -- and because it is the only idea worthy of the name in the whole book. It sticks out like, well, a real idea in a slushpile. But, as in all disaster stories, the Exciting Bit is promised early and delivered late, and it's a disappointment when it comes. The intricate small doings of the intrepid band of temporal castaways from the 22nd century, stranded six million years in the past, are about as interesting as excerpts from "Desert Island Discs", and I don't mean the music.

Even in SF, especially in SF that has ambitions to be Literature, it is customary to maintain a certain minimum standard of credibility, which results mainly from the consistency with which the fantastic devices are employed. Golden torcs as mind-amplifying devices I can take. Coercive powers produced by the same torcs I can still take. But I bridle at the ability to produce mental zaps that blast away hundreds of thousand of tons of rock (yess, that's how the Mediterranean Seawall was destroyed), courtesy of the same torcs. Pulling a blaster ex machina is a feeble enough denouement to any plot, but a psychic blaster? Yech!

The remaining details of plot and character lack any faint trace of originality. For instance, the two alien races that our friends from the 22nd century discover in the Pliocene are called the Tanu (like the Irish Children of Danu) and the Firvulag (like their traditional enemies the Fir Bolg). Individual names are pinched, too: Leyr from Llyr, Dionket from Dian Cecht; and the rather shadowy characters of the Tanu and Firvulag nobility are based on the equally vague traditional roles of the gods and heroes whose names they bear. That's okay; borrowing cultural trappings from an unfamiliar source is a good way to make a society feel real. The annoyance comes on finding that one of the 22nd century characters is an anthropologist, commissioned to do a field study of Tanu/Firvulag society. During this, he makes a Great Discovery, about which he keeps muttering to himself until he gets killed off. Does he tell us what the Great Discovery is? No. Does he even mention the remarkable similarity between this culture and the Irish myths (something it would take a real anthropologist about 30 seconds to notice)? No. Does the author think we're too stupid to notice, or that we're vain enough to flatter ourselves for solving such a terrifically hard cultural riddle? Bleh. And there's more of this saga to come; volume 3, to be entitled The Nonborn King, is on its way. Watch for more scathing reviews in future thrilling instalments.

Walter M. Miller Jnr -- THE DARFSTELLER AND OTHER STORIES (Corgi, 223pp, £1.75)

Reviewed by Mary Gentle

This is a fairly forgettable collection of 1950s pulp short stories, with all that implies by way of cardboard characterisation, interstellar "new frontiers", male chauvinism, and writing so bad that it occasionally verges on the ludicrous.

"The Darfsteller" concerns human vs. android actors, and is slightly less sugary than Spider Robinson in a theatrical mood. Miller can be clumsily sentimental, as in "The Will" (time travel saves little boy with leukemia) and "I, Dreamer" (a short version of The Ship Who Sang). Two more of these stories, "Vengeance For Nikolai" and "The Lineman", are a pair of oddities; the latter might well be subtitled "The Greatest Little Whorehouse On Luna", and the former is the story of a female Russian spy's assassination of an American general. The method used would cause Freud to leap up and down with joy (I will say only that it concerns poinsoned milk).

What marks these stories out, if anything, is that they were written by the author of A Canticle For Leibowitz, and there is a constant thread of religious imagery running through them. Gethsemene and sacrifice in "Crucifixus Etiam" (the terraforming of Mars), for instance, and the crucified theif-hero of "Big Joe And The Nth Generation", otherwise an Asimovian story about a computer holding knowledge for a degenerate human population. There is even the dreadfully folksy "You Triflin' Skunk", in which a woman has a son by an alien, the boy being in telepathic contact with his unworldly father -- I suspect this is meant to recall demonic possession, but it reads equally well as a black comedy version of the Christ story.

Rather than The Darfsteller And Other Stories, the reader in search of an introduction to Miller's work should read A Canticle For Leibowitz, and leave these stories embedded in the 1950s like dinosaurs in tar-pits.

J. N. Williamson -- THE BANISHED (Playboy Paperbacks, 255pp, $2.75)

Reviewed by Chris Bailey

The Banished is one of those awful-looking books with "Occult" on the out-

side so that the bookseller knows where to put it. I sat down to it with a sense of anticipatory glee, hatchet at the ready, but was somewhat nonplussed after ninety pages; the author was spending a lot of time on character detail and the writing wasn't too bad in a self-conscious way. But then the two main characters turned out to be a couple of pious wets and the book fizzled out very oddly with page upon page of Christian Science proselytising. Perhaps Playboy are trying to ensure that their list carries a decent motal tone; by way of compromise, or perhaps consolation, this books also contains at least thirty references to the heroine's massive breasts (although we're told that she has, besides, "knees like a six-year-old", which rather caught my interest -- were the knees going to collapse beneath the intolerable strain?). If you're into Mysterious Disappearances and the like then you could pick a lot worse than this from the occult shelves, because the author has made an effort to write a book rather than an ode to his bank manager, though I still wouldn't go out of my way to positively recommend it.

Larry Niven & Steven Barnes -- DREAM PARK (Ace, 434pp, $2.95)

Reviewed by Brian Smith

I have to admit that I took a vague dislike to this book from the outset -- but then it's not exactly geared for compromise. For example, I am not an admirer of brash and tasteless packaging, and I think that a cover featuring ray-hurling heroes, a giant baboon and a large red star bellowing FIRST MASS MARKET EDITION falls neatly into that category. Moving past the cover, we come to page one, and the obligatory (this is a large Niven collaboration, remember) list of "dramatis personnae" (sic). I object to this sort of thing, partly because of the presumption that the book is sufficiently complex to warrant one, but mostly because of the inference that the reader is too stupid to manage without it. Perhaps the projected audience do need one ....but let us not stir the muddy waters of marketing too much.

On then, to the story. This is in several sections, which come apart for easy cleaning. The setting: Dream Park is a 21st century Disneyworld-plus, a technophilic wonderland in which computers and holograms can bring fantasy to life. Enter -- the characters: a motley crew of fantasy gamers, off on a quest. Some are merely Weird, others are Suspicious Characters, obviously given to Plotting. Rather like Airport with broadswords, in fact. Their fun and games are complicated by -- the murder: one of their number slips away, and before you can say "the plot thickens", a guard is dead and an Experimental Drug stolen. The security chief must then join the quest incognito, and uncover the killer before the suspects leave Cliche Manor. Sorry, that should be Gaming Area A. My mistake.

Niven scholars will recognise some old friends. Names have been changed to protect the cardboard, but security chief Alex Griffin is clearly Gil Hamilton with a respray and a fresh set of number plates, and his boss Harmony is equally clearly Lucas Garner. Most of the others come from the sterling Legion of Spear Carriers, but the sense of deja vu remains (as does a faint whiff of old Bogart movies). In fact, so much of the book is Niven's (the dialogue too is unmistakable) that I was left wondering about the precise role of internationally obscure Steven Barnes, and after much inductive reasoning came up with 4/5 Big Name Californian D&D Fan, 100/1 bar. The whole concept reeks of having been dreamed up during a room party at a West Coast convention, until finally someone said "Gee, wouldn't this make a great novel!" There ain't no scruples west of the Pecos.

Not much remains to be said. This novel is slick, shallow, predictable, undemanding and unashamed wish-fulfillment, fully as memorable as the Yellow Pages (save for Niven's titanic chutzpah in portraying characters from his work among the staples of 21st century fantasy gaming). The closest approach to any form of content is near the end, where Niven attempts to explore the heights of stamina and heroism to which people can aspire, even under conditions they know to be totally artificial. Having read this novel to the end, this is a sentiment with which I can easily identify. On the whole, though, only completely incurable Niven freaks can hope to find anything worthwhile in Dream Land. No, that should be Dream State, of course. Um....Dream Time? Oh shit, what was it called again...?

Philip Jose Farmer -- THE LOVERS (Corgi, 201pp, £1.50), INSIDE OUTSIDE (Corgi, 135pp, £1.25), DARK IS THE SUN (Granada, 400pp, £1.95), JESUS ON MARS (Granada, 237pp, £1.50)

Reviewed by Joseph Nicholas

Poking through these four books, I find it difficult to believe that Farmer was once -- and, some claim, still is -- so lauded and admired a writer. The received wisdom that passes for criticism in the SF ghetto has him shotting to prominence with his 1952 novella "The Lovers" (which, so the mythology has it, shocked everyone with its sensitive portrayal of the love between a man and a parasitical alien insect that had taken the form of a woman), subsequently being cruelly and cavalierly treated by editors unsympathetic to the themes he wished to explore, finally winning through to popular and critical acclaim with the 1967 novella "Riders Of The Purple Wage", and....blah blah blah; we have the tedium of the "Riverworld" series to remind us of the rest.

To be fair, "The Lovers" might have come as something of a revelation at the time of its original publication, but (although I haven't read it in that version) I seriously doubt that it would hold up now. Certainly, in this expanded novel version, it isn't much good at all; rather than concentrate on and thereby deepen his exploration of the relationship between the two protagonists, Farmer jas chosen to pad the story out with the dealings of an expedition sent to an alien planet by a ludicrously unlikely Terran religious dictatorship and its plan to exterminate the life it finds there, itself padded out with some tedious nonsense about alien biology and alien customs, which is itself padded out with lectures on linguistics, invented theology and yet more biology, with all the stuff about the alien woman's true nature held off until the very end, which thus destroys the ostensible point of the story. It's not a patch on Gardner Dozois's far superior Strangers (itself expanded from a novella), which really does explore the relationship between a man and an alien woman, and is withal an immeasurably subtler and maturer work.

Inside Outside, its cover informs us, is a classic; I can't imagine why. Set on the inside of a spherical hell, it chronicles the adventures of one Jack Cull as he attempts to discover the purpose for which its was created and to determine whether, as one of the other characters speculates, the man they refer to as "X" is really Christ, trapped there after his first death while a demon-imposter was resurrected in his place. Unsurprisingly (to us; the cover illustration gives half of it away), Hell turns out to be an artificial satellite built by aliens who hate to see anyone die and have therefore constructed a machine to generate and trap people's soles so that (yawn).... That they call themselves Ethicals rather gives the game away; come to that, the book's only point of interest is as something of a dry run (it dates from 1965) for the ideas (dumb ideas, admittedly, but ideas nevertheless) that later surfaced in the last book of the "Riverworld" series; it is otherwise badly realised, ineptly plotted, woodenly written and utterly forgettable.

Speaking of which....Dark Is The Sun is best described as a comic-book version of Aldiss's Hothouse, but one so pale, lifeless, ill-conceived and downright unimaginative that an artist would be hard pushed to come up with even one picture recognisably based upon it. (Granada's cover artist gets away with it by concentrating on the characters.) Nor is the plot of any real consequence, consisting as it does of a series of incidents arranged in roughly chronological order and connected only by the presence of the protagonists -- a bumbling, brawny clown and his equally dull-witted henchmen, one of whom is an intelligent vegetable and is so endearingly cute that I winced with embarrassment every time it appeared -- who are, we're told, united in a quest to discover the secret of their world; but for all their travels and adventures, they discover nothing at all until the end, when the Super-Powerful Being Who Rules The Universe is shunted onstage to deliver the obligatory lecture that Farmer these days uses as an excuse to bring his jerky, stumbling narratives to their close. And too late to interest the reader, who will have been numbed into catatonia long before then, from the sheer leaden awfulness of the writing if from nothing else.

And so to Jesus On Mars, not quite the worst novel I've ever read but nevertheless one so outstandingly, irredeemably bad that I cannot for the life of me understand why anyone would want to publish it, whether it be by a name author or no. It concerns the capture of an expedition to Mars by a group of humans living beneath its surface who were themselves kidnapped from Earth two thousand years before; one of the humans was Jesus, who has been installed in a globe hanging beneath the roof of the huge (and geologically impossible) cavern in which they all live and whom they all worship (even the aliens, who -- unbelievably -- have been converted to Judaism); after many a tedious lecture on original sin, forgiveness, sacrifice, redemption, repentance, resurrection and other bits of theology of interest only to the truly devout (who will gain nothing from this plonking, superficial and thoroughly fifth-hand discussion of it all), they all return to Earth to install Christ as the ruler of mankind and initiate the new millenium. Clearly, after many years of playing with religion, Farmer has now been overcome with it and, with a fervour that only the born again can manifest, is so concerned to push his message of personal salvation that he no longer cares about even the basics of constructing and executing a novel. It lacks sense, plausibility, consistency, depth, pace, imagination, narrative, structure, intelligence, characterisation -- everything, in fact, except words, which simply gush on and on and on for page after page after page. It is a travesty of a book, drivel of the lowest possible order, vile beyond belief, worthless in every way, an insult to --

Words fail me, they really do. Philip Jose Farmer an imaginative and innovative writer of science fiction? Ha!

Robert Don Hughes -- THE WIZARD IN WAITING (Futura/Del Rey, 259pp, £1.25)

Reviewed by Kevin K. Rattan

For centuries, the two-headed dragon Vicia-Heincx had lived in the only passage between The Three Lands, altering their customs and economies -- and now he was dead. Such is the pocture at the end of The Prophet Of Lamath, and with a good eye for the effects of such changes Hughes adds certain factors for the beginning of its sequel, The Wizard In Waiting. The merchants' stranglehold on trade between the lands is no longer in force, since they had achieved it by introducing slavery to feed the dragon and thus pay his tolls. The Imperial House of Chaomonous has come back to life, after centuries of sleep enforced by the dragon's barring of magic from the lands.

In The Prophet Of Lamath, humour was provided by the dragon's arguing with himself and not being remarkably bright, and in The Wizard In Waiting the Imperial House provides something of the same by virtue of his great age and his petulant character; he acts as a backdrop against which the human characters move, but does not dictate the plot. This, unusually for a fantasy, develops from the characters; there is no quest that brings them together but, rather, they follow their own desires and beliefs -- their actions dictate the plot, rather than the other way around. Their nature and their interactions are also responsible for a great deal of the humour, though this more mainstream technique is supplemented by the inversion of fantasy stereotypes -- for example, a stuttering hero and an evil wizard who flees a domineering woman.

The Wizard In Waiting is a successful sequel to The Prophet Of Lamath, continuing in the same vein, and Hughes has clearly left himself room for further sequels. However, escapistly entertaining as these books are, I suspect that their novelty will wain if they turn into a lengthy series. Their appeal is an essentially light-hearted one, and the only way in which Hughes can succeed in making them continually interesting is by coming up with ideas as intriguing as the dragon and the Imperial House -- which will be very difficult.

Barry Malzberg -- THE CORSS OF FIRE (Ace, 168pp, $2.50)

Reviewed by Dave Langford

The black wit, the schizoid viewpoint, the prose so fluid that it verge on babble: Malzberg's hallmarks are well enough known. Often his novels seem much of a muchness, yet a few connect with special force through being about

something with the right resonances: the dark side of the space age in Beyond Apollo and The Falling Astronauts, the power and hollowness of SF tropes in Galaxies, the semi-autobiography of Herovit's World, even the symbol-ridden chessgame in Tactics Of Conquest. And in The Cross Of Fire, Biblical archetypes: its schizoid hero is being treated voluntarily (or perhaps merely neutralised by an ambiguous far-future state) by immersion in the roles of Moses, Jesus, Job, Jonah, Jehovah, as seen through all too modern and critical eyes. It is blackly funny, but in both the therapeutic dreams and the future reality the dice are clearly loaded against our not very lovable hero. We know he is booked for no good end -- is this not Malzberg country, after all? In real life he's perpetually nagged, perpetually put in the wrong; in a familar form of SF psychotherapy, his experiences in Biblical fantasies are pointedly similar, with additional joys ranging from Job's problems with boils and Mrs Job to full-scale crucifixion. Patently the fantasy is meant to send him scurrying shamefacedly back to reality; being a Malzberg hero, he instead embraces it, glorying in the religious framework which makes even his oettiest afflictions seem vital, cosmic, important -- and still, to us, wickedly amusing. A slighlt opaque conclusion allows him what may be partial victory in his terms if not the world's: the savour is less in this non-destination than in the journey on Malzberg's ghost-train. If you hated Beyond Apollo you'll hate this. I rather enjoyed it, though as with so man Malzberg works it seems more skilled than sympathetic -- more admirable than likeable.

J. H. Rosny-Aine -- QUEST FOR FIRE (Penguin, 143pp, £1.25)

Reviewed by Judith Hanna

Not just the book of the film, La Guerre Du Feu, first published in 1911, was written by Joseph-Henri Boex, a prominent literary figure and winner of the Prix d'Academie Goncourt. The book's lucidity prevents its simple plot from becoming either tediously obvious or ludicrously far-fetched despite its sprinkling of absurdities. For the most part, it's a pragmatic exploration of how human nature, stripped of cultural accretions of technology and superstition, might be. Since the primitive men it's about have an eloquent command of language, the book does not contain any of the extravagantly noisy primate displays (gestures by Desmond Morris, proto-language by Anthony Burgess) which, occurring as they do when it would seem wisest to keep silent, are the most absurd feature of the movie. But since neither book nor movie can claim factual accuracy, why cavil at a little added eccentricity?

True men (Cro-Magnon, I assumed from the book, though more like Homo habilis in the film) can speak and can use but not make fire. They co-exist with a variety of other hominid races: the man-eating Kzam, like themselves but stockier, eveolved towards brute strength rather than speed; the red-skinned Little Men who have no language but only gestures; the swamp-dwelling Thin Men with "long heads and torsos singularly long and narrow", "a cylindrical body almost without shoulders so that the arms seemed to grow out like the feet of a crocodile" and scaly skin, who have invented the spear-thrower and know how to make fire by the percussion method (in the film, they're Hamitic people making fire by the friction method which anthropologists have found does not work); and, more fantastic yet, the Blue-Skinned Men: "Its face was enormous, with the jaws of a hyena, round eyes alert and full of fire, a long low cranium and a deep torso like a lion's only larger: each of its four limbs ended in a hand. Dark hair, shining tawny and blue, covered its whole body. It was from the chest and shoulders that Naoh recognised a man, for the four hands made it a singular creature, and the head recalled a buffalo, bear or dog." Is it an impossible monstrosity, or is Rosny-Aine describing a gorilla? The film simply leaves it out. As well as these aliens, Naoh, our hero, and his companions meet up with cave-bears, a giany lion-tiger and the Great Mammoth, with whom they make friends, on their trek to regain for their people the fire that has been lost; there's a mention of "sluggish saurians wallowing among the flowering rushes and water-lilies", but no such anachronisms appear on stage. And when he achieves the object of his quest, Naoh will win the ag-

ing chief's beautiful daughter, Gammla: "Who is better made among the daughters of men? She can shoulder a doe, walk without weakening from dawn to dusk, withstand hunger and thirst, dress animal hides and swim across a lake. She will bear unconquerable children." A fitting end to any quest.

That's the book's plot, significantly different from the film in its treatment of a subject on which all too much arrant nonsense has been put forward by the likes of Desmond Morris and Robert Ardrey, but with the further virtues not only of permitting its characters to react sensibly to the conditions which confront them but also of presenting itself honestly as fiction rather than purveying its speculations as fact.

E. C. Tubb -- THE QUILLIAN SECTOR (Arrow, 158pp, £1.25)

Reviewed by Jim England

No less than number 19 in the incredible "Dumarest" saga! Action-packed space opera! (Tubb often writes like this, not using proper sentences.) "Earl Dumarest's latest galaxy-shattering adventure", says the blurb. He has apparently been searching for "lost Terra" (as if anyone but an SF writer would ever call Earth that) throughout the previous 18 volumes (which I have been fortunate enough to miss); each was a self-contained adventure, and so is this one.

A fight on pages 21-25 sets the tone. Dumarest is in the showers on a construction site when he has a disagreement with a much larger man. "Menser was huge, coiled ropes of muscle shifting beneath the gleaming ebon of his skin, his head a ball of bone, hair cropped close to the scalp", and so on. So "Dumarest threw the soap. It flashed from his hand to drive against the giant's face, to land beneath one of the thick eyebrows and to slam against the eye with a force which tore the orb from its socket, to leave an ugly red hole streaming blood." But: "Hurt, he was even more dangerous than before", so Dumarest kicks him in the knee: "This time, he felt bone yield, the kneecap splintering...." Incredibly, we are asked to believe that the villain's only response is to snarl "Coward!" and continue fighting "balanced on one foot."

This is nauseous stuff, not even fit for morons. Ordinarily, I would not have continued further, but out of conscience I read on, discovering villains who take "orgasmic pleasure" in killing, more fights, attacks by sea monsters and giant spiders. I was intrigued to see whether Tubb could maintain the same vile, low standard for the full 158 pages, and as far as I can see he succeeded. This whole sub-species of violence-filled space opera is rather like the Wild West or the slums of New York transported into the future, complete with "taverns" for spacemen, an ethos of admiration for those who can "hold their liquor", gambling, drugs, prostitution, and the glamourisation of crime and aggression. It is mindless, alienating, dehumanising stuff, and cannot be doing anyone except its writers any good. Why does it continue to be published, read, and allowed to masquerade as (and debase the name of) SF? I wish I knew.

Quite apart from its objectionable content, the quality of the writing in The Quillian Sector is amazingly low. Tubb appears incapable of writing a single admirable sentence, even by accident. Instead of producing a simple, straightforward sentence like "He turned and stared toward the distant range of mountains", which has some dignity, he will give us: "Turning, he stared toward the distant range of mountains". He is overfond of active verbs (as are most hack writers), and they are often badly chosen; they make his characters sound like twitching puppets. His dialogue is stilted and his descriptions mechanical. He patronises the reader.

I have no hopes of any of the 18 Dumarest novels I have missed, or of any that may be forthcoming in the future. In comparison with this type of fiction, bank robbery seems like an almost benign activity.

J. Michael Reaves -- DARKWORLD DETECTIVE (Bantam, 257pp, $2.50)

Reviewed by Paul Kincaid

Darkworld Detective is boring.

What a dreadful thing for a critic to say. If a book fails to arouse even a modicum of interest, how can you possibly make a proper critical

judgement? But then, the fact that a book is unreadably dull is itself a pretty fair critical judgement, at least when applied to this bit of nonsense.

What we have here is a mixture of science fiction, fantasy, detective story and comedy, and they clash terribly. Good comedy requires strict adherence to an internal logic and a light touch. Darkworld Detective has neither -- not only did it not make me laugh, it didn't even raise a smile. To show you what I mean, the best jokes in the entire book are the headings for each of the four parts: "The Big Spell", "The Maltese Vulcan", "Murder On The Galactic Express" and "The Man With The Golden Raygun". In addition, these painfully contrived puns are probably the most inventive parts of the book.

Reaves has the cheek to quote Raymond Chandler in one of his epigraphs. Chandler showed that genre fiction could also have literary merit; he also showed that the best detective stories are moral tales that provide a glimpse of the dark side of ourselves and our society. Unfortunately, his skill has spawned countless imitators who have learned only one thing from Chandler: to have a resourceful cynic as a hero. Reaves is just one more of these imitators.

He also falls victim to the worst failings of science fiction and fantasy. I have grown tired of worlds in which we are told magic works rather than science. Rarely has the magic resulted in a radically different society; all too often, it is simply an excuse the author uses to allow anything he wants to happen, and that is just what is is in this case. And when anything can happen, when some new spell can be produced out of thin air the moment someone gets into difficulties, then those difficulties lose their interest and the plot as a whole is robbed of its tension.

I could go on saying why this book fails at everything it sets out to achieve, but quite frankly I can't be bothered. A novel like this is just not worth the effort.

Allyn Thompson -- THE AZRIEL UPRISING (Bantam, 181pp, $2.50)

Reviewed by Martyn Taylor

Reading science fiction often requires some heavy duty suspension of disbelief. There are limits, and the proposition that the USSR, incapable of feeding its population -- which is permanently stoned on rotgut vodka and has work practices that would make even Red Robbo blanch -- could successfully invade and occupy the USA goes way beyond those limits. Little green men from the hell-holes of Uranus are one thing, but this is ridiculous. Equally ridiculous is Thompson's picture of the USA after a (very!) selective holocaust: it's like Los Angeles during a brown out, like roughing it in a forty-fott camper. The resistance is made up of John Waynes, except that they've all got big tits and long blonde hair and talk like Debbie Harry (I know John Wayne's real name was Marion Morrison, but....). The Red Army, having invaded the USA, has reverted to being made up of thick Ivans, to match for our hip heroine, Paul Revere in drag.

I could go on almost as long as Thompson herself in pointing out the absurdities of this trash, but what's the point? This is an attempt to create to order a redneck paranoid fantasy, and it is written with all the wit, style, imagination and finesse of a semi driving over a turd. The sentiments may look okay in Boise, Idaho, but out here in the real world the whole mess looks like a cheap and nasty attempt by an unscrupulous publisher to cash in on the fears of a confused people. Its cinematic anbitions dribble over every pathetic page -- my God, they've proably cast Farrah Fawcett already! Hell, I know these people elected the man who put the idiot into idiot boards, but even they deserve better than this.

Jack L. Chalker -- QUEST FOR THE WELL OF SOULS (Penguin, 302pp, £1.75)

Reviewed by Mary Gentle

Jack Chalker has written an appalling book, and the only surprising thing about it is finding that it's published by Penguin, a by-word for literacy and quality -- two things noticeably absent from Quest For The Well Of Souls.

The Well World is a planet-sized laboratory divided into independent hexagonal biospheres; the sentient races in the hexes are trial runs for species seeded into the galaxy. (There are super-computers and super-beings in there too, somewhere.) Entities who stumble over the Well World are captured and processed into one or other of the hexes, taking the shape of that life-form. Chalker borrows life-forms from mythology, biology, Disney and SF, but the outcome -- centaur, butterfly, four-armed snake, or whatever -- is always the same: a cardboard human character in a freaky costume. It's the kind of book that's impossible to read twice, since once the reader has survived the bogglingly flat and dull prose long enough to discover what happens in the book (two rival groups in search of crashed spaceship, seeking to escape imprisonment on the Well World) there is nothing of further interest. It also suffers from being part two of a longer novel (part one being Exiles At The Well Of Souls), and also part of a larger five-volume series. It has constantly to inform or remind the reader of what has gone before -- in the unlikely event that the reader cares.

The level on which it's written is best illustrated by the fact that, here, "mind" and "soul" are regarded as one and the same thing. The characters are motivated by power, control and, above all, manipulation. The author's people tend to suffer gratuitous and degrading form-changes at every turn; this is particularly evident in respect of those characters who happen to be female -- the human heroine spends the entire book as either a pig or a horse or an entity half-woman and half-mule. Minds are controlled and changed as easily as bodies on the Well World; it is the fascist's totalitarian dream.

The key word for Quest For The Well Of Souls is "artificial". The action takes place on an artificial world (outdoor landscapes, yes, but they feel plastic; Chalker's imagination is impoverished); bodies and minds are artificially created; the whole universe may be the artificial creation of the super-alien Markovians (a god-like race who committed mass suicide out of boredom, for which one sympathises -- but at least they got out before the whole pitiful series started). The overwhelming effect, on this reader at least, is one of claustrophobia.

Craig Mills -- THE BANE OF LORD CALADON (Futura/Del Rey, 218pp, £1.25)

Reviewed by Nigel Richardson

Dreary, deadly, unamusing, colourless, tedious, stale, insipid, sluggish, uninteresting, pedestrian -- Roget's Thesaurus says it all under synonyms for "dull". But enough of this disinterested objectivity....

The Bane Of Lord Caladon is without doubt the most worthless piece of tripe I have ever read. The plot is so determinedly banal that it makes the directions on a tin of baked beans read like an excerpt from The Brothers Karamazov. Its eponymous protagonist, exiled from his rightful castle by a talking dragon called Thugredid, goes in search of a magic jewel named Dylcaer (which once beolnged to the dragon) and thus comes into contact with a jovial red-headed swordsman, a churlish innkepper or two, a comely gypsy (whom he manages to get pregnant despite only kissing her), some surly cut-throat pirates, a leathery witch (who can turn herself into a cracking blonde nymphet just by snarling at a mirror), and a token Eldritch Being; he steals the jewel from the leathery witch, hands it over to the dragon, and everyone lives mindlessly ever after.

The characterisation is an insult to the limpest cardboard: Lord C. spens all his time laughing ruefully at the elements, running an idle hand through his hair, and having profound thoughts in italics. It is hardly surprising that the characterisation -- and the plot -- is so dismal: Mills must have spent all his time ensuring that he had not left a single cliche out of his book. Mists are eerie, smiles are wan, faces turn strange and threatening in dreams, voices echo through cavernous chambers, beer is supped, Lord C. feels a stirring within him when he meets the gypsy girl whose hair and lips he refers to as being like silk, glances are curious, hearts quicken, looks are quizzical....

To conclude: I can recommend this book only to those of you who possess a table with one leg slightly shorter than the others.

James Blish -- DOCTOR MIRABILIS (Avon, 271pp, $2.95)

Reviewed by Sue Thomason

This book is not science fiction but a member of that much-neglected sub-genre, history-of-science fiction. Blish shows here that he can exercise his projective imagination backwards as easily as forwards, and he uses as much care, invention and wit in portraying the 13th century as he does in depicting the 23rd. He does it superbly.

His subject is the life and times of Roger Bacon, scholar, philosopher, cleric, and scientist, who seems to have singlehandedly rediscovered the "scientific method", neglected since the death of Aristotle, and ignored again for centuries after Bacon's death. Almost nothing is known for certain about Bacon's life, although a great body of popular legend became attached to his name. His writings are scattered, and many of those that remain have never been published or translated from the original Latin.

What little we do know of him shows him in an attractive light. He speculated on the possible applications of the knowledge he gathered and tested in thousands of experiments, he discussed spectacles, diving bells, telescopes, flying machines, and many more twentieth-century commonplaces, he worked on optics and magnetism. Blish says that "the whole tissue of the space-time continuum of general relativity is a direct descendant of Roger's assumption....that the universe has a metrical frame, and that mathematics thus is in some important sense real, and not just a useful exercise".

Bacon is a figure well worth bringing to our attention, and the reconstruction of him in this novel makes fascinating and entertaining reading. Blish avoids the twin traps of historical fiction, neither making his characters talk and behave like temporally displaced inhabitants of the 20th century nor indulging in olde-worlde spellynge (although he does us a different syntax and vocabulary to show when characters switch into English from their normal Latin). Dialogue, character, incident: all have a richness of texture and an immediacy that powerfully recreate the quality of 13th century life.

Blish stresses that this work is a fiction, not an attempt at exact historical accuracy, and it is a vivid, highyl entertaining, readable, thought-provoking and instructive fiction. I commend it to your attention.

Michael Bishop & Ian Watson -- UNDER HEAVEN'S BRIDGE (Ace, 198pp, $2.50, and Corgi, 160pp, £1.50)

Reviewed by Chris Bailey

A first collaboration between two admired authors; the book didn't quite match up to my expectations, but this was probably due to its theme. In brief: human expedition encounters a strange and unforthcoming race of aliens on a distant planet; much human guesswork, aliens revealed to be a pretty kinky bunch; everybody off home again, not much the wiser.

Not very tempting, but I would still suggest that Under Heaven's Bridge is well worth your time. (It won't take long -- I estimate that the book contains less than 40,000 words.) The one weakness of the aliens, the Kybers, is that they exist only to provoke explanation, but the authors turn this to their advantage and the explanation does lead the reader down some genuinely interesting and accessible metaphysical paths. Indeed, the book groans at the speculative seams; issues thrown open for our consideration in its first forty pages include the nature of cybernetics, the relation of the individual to his god, life, death and rebirth, and the grammar of the universe in general.

All in the usual Watson style, you say, but the arcane mysteries are rendered approachable by having a fascinating focus in the Kybers. Walking Giacometti sculptures, they answer direct questions with a mixture of riddles, puns and annoying pronouncements along the lines of "There is no enquiry whose answer does not contain a programme for evil". Obsessed by their passive aloofness, one of the humans enters into a transcendent communion with them and, apparently plugged into the direct data flow of the cosmos, there the authors and the other characters must leave him -- and thereby hangs a vital thread of ambiguity. The exact nature of the Kybers is never established, and although they are given to mutterings about Some-

where Else and the Hidden Ineffable, and many other similar phrases which set the reader's teeth on edge, their claims are never verified. Are they laughable freaks of nature, or are they genuinely able to advance their own evolution through willing the intercession of the "God-Between-The-Galaxies"? The intrigue is skillfully sustained to the last page.

The writing is seamless, tightly packed and a vital ingredient of the book's richness. A sample:

> "'Birth, resurrection, renewal, and life -- all at a strata of consciousness inaccessible to the unconjoined.'
>
> "'Then how the hell are we going to be able to participate?' Sixkiller demanded. 'Do we bring our own extension cords and plug into the nearest faintly humming Kyber?'
>
> "The Kyber tore a piece of sailcloth flesh from its right arm and offered it to Sixkiller. 'Eat thou this in remembrance of what thou hast never been,' it said, not untenderly."

From the sense-nonsense of the Kybers' succinct puzzles, through to a flash of humour, an instant of horror, and back again in the space of a few sentences; in spite of a few purple splashes, the prose demands close attention and is especially noteworthy in the descriptions of the bleak beauty of the Kybers' homeworld.

It's not a total success, I think, but it is a book which offers plenty that is of interest. Incidentally, let's have no Watson-can't-do-characters gibes this time; while the book's brevity may preclude full and rounded character portraits, there are brief sketches of some fairly strong individuals. You can tell them apart -- perhaps Bishop helped.

Keith Laumer -- THE ULTIMAX MAN (Berkley, 186pp, $2.25)

Reviewed by Brian Smith

About twenty pages into this novel, I turned back to the beginning to look at the copyright date. My mind took a few seconds to absorb the figure "1978", and then boggled slightly. The setting and characters are, you see, entirely consistent with the late 40s or early 50s; something from the Pratt/de Camp or Fredric Brown schools, perhaps. A veritable coelacanth of a novel, then, bursting out upon an unsuspecting world some thirty years after the species was believed extinct. I could not help but like it, though -- Laumer's braod humour gives an engaging period charm to what should have been an irritatingly antiquated style.

Laumer's hero is a minor Chicago hood eith the unlikely name of Damocles Montgomerie who can only have failed the audition for Guys And Dolls by the merest fraction. As the story opens, he is about to suffer an occupational hazard of the terminal kind, but is saved by the intervention of Xorialle, an observer from the Galactic Consensus. The alien has chosen Damocles to become the ultimax man, master of every skill and discipline ever devised by man, for his own rather shadowy purposes. Damocles, however, unhappy at being a mere cat's tentacle, summons up some good old-fashioned human cunning, outwits Xorialle, steals his spaceship and heads off for the galactic big time.

So far, so good. Bright, fast-paced stuff, two chuckles per page or your money back. But as soon as Laumer gets Damocles off Earth he seems rather at a loss as to exactly what to do with him. He has the odd adventure or two, gets locked up a lot, and generally wades knee-deep in other beings' ulterior motives. As a result, the second half of the novel loses both pace and direction, becoming slightly confusing and rather boring. Laumer lost my interest long before the end. Unsatisfying and yet unobjectionable, I certainly can't recommend this novel, but neither can I find it in me to condemn it. Classify this one under "mostly harmless".

Charles Sheffield -- ERASMUS MAGISTER (Ace, 218pp, $2.50)

Reviewed by Jim England

Erasmus Magister is described on the cover as both SF and historical fiction, and it may be the latter. At first sight, it looks like a novel, but its three parts are three novelettes of roughly equal length in which, ac-

cording to the blurb, "Scientist, gourmet, poet, and sleuth, the brilliant Erasmus Darwin (grandfather of Charles) is brought to life in a series of mysterious adventures set in the 18th century". In fact, the book achieves no such thing.

On the credit side, it has an eight-page appendix giving information about Darwin and the famous Lunar Society of the Midlands that he founded, of which James Watt, Josiah Wedgewood, Matthew Boulton, Joseph Priestly, Samuel Galton and William Murdock (inventor of gas lighting) were all members, meeting monthly so that they could ride home by the light of the full moon. On the debit side, the three stories do not concern themselves with these people at all, or even with Erasmuc Darwin. Instead, they concern themselves with a fat, gluttonous man who talks interminably (and boringly) to a companion called Jacob Pole, like an inferior Sherlock Holmes talking down to an inferior Watson, and whom the author pretends is Erasmus Darwin. The "characterisation" consists of making him fat, gluttonous and (unlike his real self) boring, despite the author's opinion that he is "arguably the greatest eighteenth century Englishman".

To make him gluttonous is quite easy. He is described eating countless meals of the sort that would be eaten about 1776, the author having obviously researched deeply into this subject. To make him boring, the author has presumably drawn upon his own experience of himself.

The three stories are a terrible rip-off. Although intended for adult readers, they come over as children's adventure stories. In the first one, a dying man reveals to Darwin and his friend the supposed secret of a priceless treasure in a sunken Spanish galleon, and we read 79 pages expecting to find it only to be told at the end that there is no such treasure and no such galleon. In the second story, after a slow start, we feel slightly sick when we hear mention of a search for other kinds of treasure and think "He can't! He an't!" But Sheffield does, in 72 pages. In the third story, we are relieved to find no mention of treasure, and instead go in search of a mysterious creature called the Lambeth Immortal. We even find it, after 57 pages, but it is much more ordinary that we thought it might be. If these stories have a moral, or if Charles Sheffield has a recurrent theme, it is that some things may <u>appear</u> exciting/mysterious/supernatural/wonderful, but when you discover the truth about them they're all bloody boring really. Charles Sheffield can certainly make them so, anyway....

The writing is 90 percent dialogue, full of padding:

> "'We should have brought a timepiece with us, Erasmus. I wonder what the time is. We must have been here three or four hours already.'
>
> "'A little after midnight, if the moon is keeping to her usual schedule. Are you warm enough?'
>
> "'Not too bad. Thank God for these blankets....'"

If the characters were drinking tea, they would probably have asked each other whether they took milk, cream or sugar.

<u>Phyllis Ann Karr -- THE IDYLLS OF THE QUEEN (Ace, 341pp, $2.95)</u>

Reviewed by Judith Hanna

It's an intriguing idea; a classic murder mystery set in Malory's Camelot with half the Round Table, not to mention Morgan Le Fay, as suspects. Has Queen Guenevere tried to poison Sir Gawaine? Or is she being framed? And if so, whodunnit? Karr obviously knows and loves her Malory well; every chapter begins with a quote, sometimes relevant, from him. Unfortunately, her devotion extends to faithfully emulating the tedium of his prose -- detail piled upon unremitting detail. The imitation is not exact -- Karr eschews elaborate archaism and spares us the blow-by-blow slow motion replays of jousts; instead, since she's a twentieth century American, we get grimace-by-grimace soap opera emotionalisation.

Her narrator-detective is Sir Kay, Arthur's seneschal, depicted by Malory as a churlish buffoon; the self-justifications Karr puts in his mouth show him in a little better light. Sir Mordred is Kay's sidekick; since the author does not seek to "solve" his character as though it were a crossword puzzle, leaving him an ill-starred enigma, he emerges as the only halfway

real character in the book. Together, both prime suspects suspecting each other, they ride the rounds encouraging such material witnesses as the Lady of the Lake, Morgan Le Fay, and Mordred's brothers to spill their guts in gossip and self-confession. In the absence of solid evidence to be mined from Malory, Karr goes for a "psychological" solution which, inevitably, is as unconvincing as the characters it hangs upon. It's a pity to see so much earnest effort achieve so little except sheer weight of words.

Frederik Pohl -- DRUNKARD'S WALK (Granada, 133pp, £1.25)

Reviewed by Mary Gentle

World-wide conspiracy is the order of the day here. Our hero, Cornut, has a small problem -- his tendency to repeated suicide attempts, which serves to put a time limit on what is an easily readable and slick action novel. The characters are barely above the comicbook level, but the book is funny.

Like a lot of traditional SF, Drunkard's Walk is another run through them old paranoia blues. In this case, the story concerns Cornut's attempts to find out what's going on before the grim reaper finally gets him and, via the multiple-points-of-view narrative, the lives of his friends and colleagues, most of whom are also out to get him. What is more interesting is the world Pohl has created: a satirical dichotomy between the highly electronicised university in which Cornut works as a mathematics lecturer and the industrial world outside, the deprived background of his girlfriend. Once again, the future has sneaked up on SF and dealt it a nasty blow from behind: Pohl's world is now instantly recognisable as that of the Open University.

The "drunkard's walk" metaphor is from the mathematics of random movement; Cornut's discovery of a statistical anomaly (in paranoia, nothing is random) triggers off the action. Once the villains come on stage, the outcome becomes predictable, and so do the implications of Cornut's telepathy. The ending is ambiguous only in that one is not sure if Pohl is avoiding the obvious question -- "Who guards the guardians?" -- or just assuming, with a somewhat cynical view of humanity, that the new boss will be no different from the old.

Russell Griffin -- THE MAKESHIFT GOD (Granada, 272pp, £1.50)

Reviewed by Paul Kincaid

I don't particularly like this book, but then I don't particularly dislike it either. It's a type destined to fill endless train journeys or be slept over in deckchairs in the summer sun. If it is ever re-read it will not be to rediscover its unique pleasures but simply because the reader has forgotten reading it in the first place.

As the world's fuel reserves disappeared the oil-rich Arabs became the dominant culture on Earth. Now their power, too, has gone, and everything is in decline, but apathy has left them in control. Then a long-forgotten space probe starts sending back pictures from a distant planet, showing aliens and someone who speaks first Latin, then English, and who may be the Wandering Jew. Our hero, a throwback to the days of Anglo-Saxon cultural pre-eminence, is one of the group sent to investigate and, naturally, is the one to establish contact with the alien culture.

We have seen it all before, and the only difference is the way in which the constituents are arranged. But familiarity is important for this sort of undemanding read. And, though the prose is pedestrian, the pace of the narrative and an underlying sense of humour make it not too unpleasant. I suspect Griffin had pretensions of satire, but both the targets and the weapons are too unoriginal for this ever to work.

Nevertheless, for a lightweight, reasonably entertaining read, this is as good as anything.

And that's it for this Special All-Huge Bumper Christmas issue, which has reduced the inventory to a grand total of only seven reviews. So all you people who still owe me stuff had better get your acts together and get it to me Real Soon or (horrors!) most of the next issue will be written by me.