PAPERBACK PARLOUR

Volume 3, Number 3, December 1979 -- edited by Joseph Nicholas, still at 2 Wilmot Way, Camberley, Surrey GU15 1JA, but never mind why. I will definitely be moving within the next few weeks, and publishers and such will be notified accordingly.

As per last time, there's no editorial (and no column from Rob Hansen, either, unless it arrives while I'm typing these stencils), pressure of space having dictated otherwise. Still, you've got lots of reviews from Alan Dorey, Coral Jackson, Roz Kaveney, Paul Kincaid, Brian Stableford and me to read, so why worry? But Dave Langford and Kev Smith would like me to point out that Drilkjis 5 costs 50p, not the 40p I stated last time. And that it's not yet available anyway. Real Soon Now, they promise....

Donald Moffitt -- THE JUPITER THEFT (Sphere, 313pp, £1·25)

"With the world-juggling sweep of Larry Niven and the scientific expertise of Arthur C. Clarke...." says the back cover blurb, which put me off for weeks on end. Needlessly, as it turned out, since the pace of Moffitt's plotting is considerably less hectic and less synoptic than Niven's, and his scientific information is skillfully woven into the fabric of his story rather than, as with Clarke's being simply layered on in great indigestible lumps. For The Jupiter Theft is indeed a "hard science" novel -- the science in question consisting mainly of astrophysics, nuclear physics and biology, with a smattering of other subjects besides -- and thus the sort of thing to which I'm not normally partial; despite which I found it all immensely enjoyable, not least because Moffitt can actually write: not outstandingly and certainly not beautifully, but with enough sense of narrative flow to keep the reader turning the pages in the desire to find out what happens next. Most of the happenings are, it must be admitted, rather preposterous -- an alien race scooping up entire jovian gas giants for use as fuel on their journey through the galaxy, indeed! -- but perhaps it's that which makes them acceptable; the credibility centres just give way beneath the sheer audacity of the concepts, and isn't that the very "suspension of disbelief" which most SF supposedly requires anyway? The Jupiter Theft suspends it well, and while the reader will receive no great insights into the nature of man or alien, he will at least be thoroughly entertained for many pleasant hours.

Daniel F. Galouye -- PROJECT BARRIER (Hamlyn, 238pp, 80p)

Misleadingly presented as a novel, this is actually a collection of five novelettes for which no original publication dates are given but which I think come from the early sixties. Most are now somewhat dated -- particularly "Recovery Area", with its vision of a Venus populated by carbon dioxide-breathing protomen -- but all are nevertheless quite readable. The best, and certainly the most human, is the idiotically-titled "Rub-A-Dub", dealing with the residual problems of the imprinting of four separate personalities on the mind of a young female starship pilot; while "Shuffle Board" and "Project Barrier" throw their potentially interesting ideas away in a welter of hasty overwriting, and "Reign Of The

Telepuppets" has too many unnecessary plot twists to sustain reader credibility.

Brian Stableford -- THE WALKING SHADOW (Fontana, 224pp, 95p)

Reviewed by Roz Kavency

The Walking Shadow is brilliantly conceived and in parts brilliantly executed. It is the tale of Paul, sane, honest and sceptical messiah of the doom- and cult-ridden end of the century, and the first of many to learn to jump forward in time. Add to this standard post-Carnell dictatorship politics, a race of alien eco-prigs, an almost indestructible robot, "phase-three life" and frequent repetition of the phrase "a billion years" and you get a modestly good, messy book which could have been a lot better. When Stableford is being a straightforwardly formulaic hack he is a good hack because he has mastered a tone of voice the cynicism of which jells with clean conventional plotting to produce a superior commercial product; when he is being a lumberingly mythic "clear-eyed seer of the future" -- as in The Realms Of Tartarus -- he is also rather good because he is damn clever and has the sense at times to leave a strong image alone. In this book he tries to combine his two modes and they don't mix. In the latter half of the novel there is less tacky thrillerism and it immediately improves. It's an interesting failure, worth reading.

Fred & Geoffrey Hoyle -- FIFTH PLANET (Penguin, 85p)

Reviewed by Keith Plunkett (whose name I omitted from the colophon -- apologies)

Another unmemorable effort from this pair, set in the world of 2087, which isn't too unlike the world of 1956 (when this book was written). The technological changes relate only to space travel, the social changes are nonexistent and the political situation a straight cold war between East and West with improbable state groupings and a neutral Britain. In 2087, then, another solar system passes close by our own (an impossible event, considering the very low speed at which the pass is made and the distances between our local stars), and American and Russian expeditions are despatched to investigate its fifth planet, the Earthlike world Achilles.. The story concerns these expeditions and the interference with them by the concealed inhabitants of Achilles, some of whom take over members of the crews for a return visit to Earth.

In the preface, the authors admit their inadequacy in setting up a credible world of the future, also feeling it necessary to point out on which pages the "basis of the plot" can be found; this turns out to be far more detailed than necessary for such a shallow work as this but, even so, they shouldn't have made such a comment anyway. In any case, the characters are only secondary to the events, and are totally forgotten when their use has expired -- this is most noticeable when attention is shifted away from the surviving crewmembers on their return to Earth.

Don't bother with this book -- it's been resurrected too many times and should have been forgotten after its first printing.

James Blish -- VOR (Arrow, 158pp, 95p)

Reviewed by Coral Jackson

Despite my initial forebodings about the 1958 copyright date, this novel -- a disjointed expansion of a short story with the dissimilar styles of writing emphasising the joins -- got off to a good start with the characterisations, eternal triangle and aeroplanes reminiscent of Nevil Shute on an off-day. With the landing of the alien, however, the plot lost all credibility, the characters reverted to cardboard, the sentences became shorter and dashes proliferated.

The book is littered with such literary gems as: "Marty got up again, his cuticles itching" (p. 12); "a covey of sputniks" (p. 24); "Marty knew better than to wear the wings, but he carried them to school in his trousers pocket, and sometimes he felt a strange sensation down there next to his thigh, as though the wings were stirring" (p. 28); "minimum permissible limit" instead of maximum; electroencephalography misspelt and described as a science rather than a technique; and such ambiguous sentences as: "The creature's progress towards the Grand Rapids, surrounded by a black case with a legend, stenciled (sic) on it identifying it as a computer...." (crystal clear, isn't it!).

The ending is not convincing, but my having seen King Kong perhaps mars any conclusion in which a light aeroplane circles an alien's head with its two occupants successfully arguing logic with it.

T. H. White -- THE BOOK OF MERLYN (Fontana, 188pp, 95p)

"(The Book Of Merlyn) holds much that is acute, disturbing, arresting, much that is brilliant, much that is moving, besides a quantity of information. But Merlyn, the main speaker, is made a mouthpiece for spleen, and the spleen is White's. His fear of the human race, which he seemed to have got the better of, had recurred, and was intensified into fury, fury against the human race, who make war and glorify it." Thus Sylvia Townsend Warner in her introduction, and she's unfortunately correct; there are no conversations in this book, merely an interminable series of lectures on the repugnance of war and ideology, and even mankind as a whole -- lectures delivered not only by Merlyn but also by the committee of animals whom Arthur first met in The Sword In The Stone, the reintroduction of whom would, in White's own words, allow him "the opportunity of bringing the wheel full circle, and ending on an animal note like the one I began on." But the tone is of course very different: a dark and depressing morbidity that stands in strong contrast to the cheerfulness and wit with which the saga of The Once And Future King began; and for all that The Book Of Merlyn is the saga's true conclusion, in retrospect it does little beyond severely tarnish it -- perhaps even beyond redemption.

Jack Williamson & James E. Gunn -- STAR BRIDGE (Magnum, 213pp, 95p)

"One of the most vital images in science fiction" claims a cover quote attributed to one Samuel R. Delaney, author of Ihalgren -- obviously not the Samuel R. Delany, author of the real Ihalgren, since he would probably have had more than enough sense to recognise this as the tedious and unlikely melodrama it is. Tedious because every item of background information is repeated and repeated ad nauseam when it doesn't need stressing at all (I did try to keep track of the number of times the authors stated that Eron was the centre of the Empire, but lost count somewhere in the low thirties), and unlikely because who in God's name can believe in something as silly as long golden travel tubes joining each planet of the Empire to Eron? Although the authors take great pains with the Eron ends of the tubes, siting them in a giant polar cap that remains motionless while the planet rotates beneath it, they screw up by locating the other ends of the tubes anywhere on the surfaces of the other planets. And by forgetting that planets rotate around their suns. And that the suns have motion relative to each other. And....it's fucking witless, and that's about the best that can be said for it.

L. Sprague de Camp -- LEST DARKNESS FALL (Sphere, 220pp, £1·25)

The time-travel element in this story is ridiculous, since nothing more esoteric than a bolt of lightning is used to project archaeologist Martin Padway back into 6th century Rome; but once he's arrives de Camp thankfully forgets it and sets about the business of his story: Padway's stemming of the encroaching Dark Ages by the "invention" of brandy, Arabic numerals, double-entry book-keeping, the printing press, newspapers, the telegraph and a host of other premature things. All of which is of course marvellous tongue-in-cheek fun, and the attentive reader will receive much painless education in the history of the period, about which de Camp is clearly most knowledgeable. I do, however, disagree with his contention that the repulsion of the Byzantine invasion of Italy in 563 would have saved Western civilisation, since the Gothic regime was already rotten to the core and would have been unlikely to hold up for much longer anyway (says he, drawing on his somewhat shallower historical knowledge). Never mind; Lest Darkness Fall is an enjoyable and unpretentious novel, and I thoroughly recommend it.

Marion Zimmer Bradley -- THE DOOR THROUGH SPACE (Arrow, 141pp, 95p)

"A novel in the classic Darkover series", claims the cover, which is nonsense: Darkover is mentioned but once, on page 46, and the action is confined entirely to the planet Wolf, a semi-autonomous member of the Terran Empire with a thriving secessionist movement. The story concerns this, a blood-feud between the main protagonist and an old friend, and the search for a working matter transmitter; all very cliched but, apart from some unfortunate lapses into pulp improbability (the hero is so strong that at one point he crushes a plastic chair with one hand), is otherwise reasonably enjoyable.

Lester Del Rey -- THE BEST OF LESTER DEL REY (Futura/Del Rey, 366pp, 85p)

Reviewed by Brian Stableford

This is the seventeenth volume in Ballantine's Best Of.... series, and smacks of immodesty in carrying the label now borne by all Ballantine's SF: "A Del Rey Book". The collection contains two novelettes and fourteen short stories, plus an introduction by Frederik Pohl (whose own Best Of.... collection was introduced by Lester Del Rey) and an afterword by the author. This whole series is geared to promoting the image of SF as one great big happy incestuous family, but does have the advantage of producing volumes that are representative of each author's best short works. The stories here cover the period from 1939 to 1964, and show the development of a keen sense of irony from an early sentimental phase to a concluding phase of impatient asperity (which may imply something about the reason why Del Rey -- unusually for those of his generation -- virtually gave up writing fiction just as the SF marketplace was becoming a land of golden opportunity). The collection represents good value for readers new to the field -- especially for those who are beginning to develop some sense of its history.

Joan Cox -- MINDSONG (Avon, 282pp, $2·25)

Reviewed by Paul Kincaid

I wish I could say I had never read so bad a book before; unfortunately I have, too many times. This is exactly the sort of turgid, cliched novel turned out by hacks who know nothing about SF and less about writing. It has some slight variation on the funny names (would you believe Pollo of Delpha?), some slight variation on the lone-outcast-saves-the-universe theme, and is otherwise an identikit rehash of hackwork that was stale 20 years ago. Its prose style is deadly: a fake formality that seems to be an attempt to copy the Victorians, who were never so rigidly bound. (it can be identified easily: the writer uses "scarce" instead of "scarcely", "do I" instead of "I do", and elision is tabu. It can be most easily recognised by the fact that it is totally unnatural; I cannot imagine anyone casually speaking in so stilted a manner.) There's more: an attempt to make every slightest incident portentous, which has exactly the opposite effect; an attempt to make it all very deep and meaningful, so it ends up with no depth and no meaning; an inability to let any noun go by without an adjective, or any verb without an adverb, so that what starts out as a well-meaning attempt to give a detailed description becomes simply boring.

Recognise the sort of book yet? Well, this one happens to be called Mindsong, was written by Joan Cox and was first published in 1979, but apart from such fine details you've already read it a dozen times under a dozen different titles by a dozen different writers. Of course, some masochist may just fancy plodding through the whole thing again, but I found it so damn tedious that I just could not finish it.

George R. R. Martin -- DYING OF THE LIGHT (Panther, 316pp, £1·25)

Reviewed by Keith Plunkett

This at first appears to be a very promising novel from a new writer. It is set on the wandering planet Worlorn, which had passed close enough to a complex system of suns for it to be temporarily colonised by the neighbouring systems for the sole purpose of holding a Festival; but now the Festival days are over, all but a few of the colonists have returned to their respective homes, and Worlorn is swinging back into the cold of interstellar space. Dirk t'Larien is summoned to the planet by his ex-lover Gwen, who is conducting a final ecological survey accompanied by her two new "husbands" from the violent planet High Kavalaan and a colleague Arkin Ruark, from the planet Kimdiss. T'Larien incurs the annoyance of some of the other remaining Kavalaan colonists and, being too proud to accept the protection of Gwen's "husbands", finds himself the object of a hunt.

And this, unfortunately, is where this potentially excellent novel breaks down. Although Martin has taken a great deal of care in setting up the background (even to the extent of supplying a Glossary at the back) and has done extremely well in capturing the twilight days of Worlorn and the greatness that will never return, it all provides no more than a bit of variety for the overlong chase that fills the rest of the book. Disappointing.

[illegible] Godwin -- THE MASTERS OF SOLITUDE (Avon, 404pp, $2·50; and Magnum, 380pp, £1·50)

"All the ingredients of a mainstream epic" claims Charles Ryan, editor of Galileo, wherein portions of this novel first appeared; but his claim is nonsensical since its post-holocaust setting, telepathy, warring quasi-feudal communities and force-field-isolated giant city make The Masters Of Solitude interpretable only in strict genre terms. (Oh poet, I'm playing the literary categories game again, aren't I?) Neither does it realy qualify as an epic, since its apparent complexity of plot and vast sweep of narrative action cloak but the simplest of themes: that man should attempt to integrate his technology with the earth that gave him and it birth, represented by the nature-worshipping quasi-feudal communities banding together for the purpose of cowing the city inot giving them medical aid, high yield wheat, electricity, colour television, mass-transit systems and complicated insurance policies. Well....it's enjoyable, yes, but it's at least 100 pages too long. (But then big books sell, don't they? Despite the fact that quality has absolutely scd-all to do with quantity. Depressing, I call it.) Two points, however: in the first place, the authors seem to assume that their readers will be as familiar with their Pennsylvania setting as they and thus, in restricting their descriptions of the landscape to a listing of place-names, impart no depth or colour or feeling to that setting (a common failing of many American SF novels); and in the second place, all the characters seem derived from good old Southern hillbilly stock and are thus incapable of articulating a single complete sentence in anything other than the most grating of slang....I mean, goshdang it, they's all jest plain nice folks, y'hear? Forty pages of that was enough to set my teeth on edge, never mind four hundred....

Barrington J. Bayley -- COLLISION WITH CHRONOS (Fontana, 192pp, 85p)

In theory, I should be antipathetic to Bayley's work since he, like Ian Watson, exhibits more concern for idea than for character; but rather than present a seemingly endless series of turgid monologues about those ideas and let his narratives go to hell in a handbasket, he takes care to integrate his metaphysical speculations with his plots, and in consequence his novels both illuminate and entertain at one and the same time. This one speculates about the nature of time, our perception of it and its relationship to the universe within a somewhat pulpish space operatic plot-framework whose complexity is beyond adequate summary; to say that it revolves around the discovery of a civilisation in Earth's future that's living backwards in relation to us (their future is our past, etc.) wouldn't be the half of it. It's gloriously freewheeling stuff, anyway, and I recommend it highly.

John Wyndham -- THE KRAKEN WAKES and CONSIDER HER WAYS (Penguin, 240pp and 190pp respectivaly, 95p each)

Back in print again: a so-so collection of stories (or so Consider Her Ways has always struck me, anyway) and a classic novel -- whose alien invaders, far from being the main subject of the novel, are merely the excuse for the generation of the global flooding that is; a catastrophe rendered less effective by the cosy middle-class way in which its presented. But such was British SF of the fifties ....speaking of which, it's interesting to note how Peter Lord's covers for these two books (and for the other four Wyndham novels reviewed last time) not only have some relevance to their contents but also manage to capture something of the period in which they were written, which is definitely no mean feat.

L. Sprague de Camp & Fletcher Pratt -- THE INCOMPLEAT ENCHANTER and THE CASTLE OF IRON (Sphere, 236pp & 191pp resp, £1·25 ea)

Astonishingly enough, this is the first British publication of these stories about Harold Shea, an amiable bumbler who, by the chanting of an arbitrary mathematical formula, is translated sideways into the imaginary worlds of myth and classical fiction -- to whit: Norse mythology in "The Roaring Trumpet", Spenser's Faerie Queene in "The Mathematics Of Magic" (in The Incompleat Enchanter), and Ariosto's Orlando Furioso (in The Castle Of Iron). (The remaining two novellas, "The Wall Of Serpents" and "The Green Magician", which took him to the worlds of the Finnish Kalevala and Irish myth, respectively, are apparently forthcoming as The Enchanter Compleated, but Sphere's publicity department can't give me a date.) Time has made them classics, of course, but I found them much less interesting than de Camp's Lest Darkness Fall, probably because it was Pratt who wrote the final

drafts and his blustery, overflowery prose style seems to have robbed them of all their potential humour. Pity.

Tanith Lee -- DRINKING SAPPHIRE WINE (Hamlyn, 300pp, £1·25)

This is actually two novels in one -- Don't Bite The Sun and its sequel Drinking Sapphire Wine -- presented as the "autobiography" of a bored teenage girl citizen of a computer-run hedonistic society of the future whose acts of rebellion against its decadent mores and customs result in her exile from the domed city in which she was born to the desert outside, where she eventually founds a commune of similar dissidents. As a parable of growing up and assuming adult responsibilities, it works reasonably well, but is flawed by its deliberately superficial geshwow style, its invented slang (which not only sounds artificial but is also embarrassingly silly), and its length (probably a consequence of its having been originally written as two separate novels).

Joe Haldeman -- INFINITE DREAMS (Avon, 224pp, $2·25; and Futura, 278pp, £1·25)

Until very recently, Haldeman has always struck me as overrated, but I was pleasantly surprised by Infinite Dreams, a collection of 13 stories which demonstrate that there's rather more depth to him than the glib predictabilities of The Forever War and Mindbridge suggest. None of the stories are particularly outstanding -- certainly not the Hugo-winning "Tricentennial", which contains enough material for a novel, and is hence little better than a Niven-like synopsis for it -- and some -- like "The Private War Of Private Jacob" and "A Time To Live" -- depend too much on their gimmicks to be anything other than instantly forgettable; but in those where he doesn't let the pace of the plotting run away with him, doesn't attempt to cram in too many different elements and doesn't let the focus wander away from the main character he shows that he does actually have something to say (and something worth saying as well). In which respect the two best stories are "A Mind Of His Own" and "26 Days, On Earth"; the remaining eight are but time-passing entertainments, and fairly enjoyable ones to boot.

George Hay (ed.) -- PULSAR 2 (Penguin, 190pp, 75p)

George Hay is one of the few remaining champions of "applied SF": a school of thought which treats it not as a form of literature but as a tool for moulding people's attitudes to change; and as a result the fiction in Pulsar 2 has a slightly Analog-ish quality: the tedious expounding of not-especially-fascinating pseduo-philosophical points which, when assimilated by the reader, will instantly awaken him to the untapped potential of the dormant half of his brain, or something. The silliest example of this is Robert Carter's "Rotating Frame-Up" which, like one of Asimov's "mysteries", has a detective solving a crime by reference to the laws of physics, and is so incompetently structured that the alert reader will have guessed which law is to blame long before the end.

Equally awful are the contributions from Perry A. Chapdelaine and E. C. Tubb, but these three are thankfully balanced by stories from Rob Holdstock ("High Pressure", the resolution of which is sadly marred by a welter of unnecessary plot twists), Garry Kilworth ("A Warrior Falls", which would have been much more effective if it hadn't been so compressed), and "Robin Douglas" ("On The Mud-Flats Of Rhuma", plotless but beautifully written). And even Alan Dean Foster, whose "What Do The Simple Folk Do...?" strays into the territory first covered by Ed Bryant's "The 10 O'Clock News Is Brought To You By...." in Again, Dangerous Visions, but is no less worthy for all that.

There's also an article on the history of nuclear weapons by Robert Weholt, and an interview with A. E. Van Vogt (conducted by the late Dr. Christopher Evans) which reveals him to be just as incomprehensible as his books. Probably had his mind rotted away by Dianetics, or something.

Anne McCaffrey -- GET OFF THE UNICORN (Corgi, 316pp, £1·25)

Fourteen stories by Anne McCryalot, all distinguished (if that's the word I'm really looking for) by the sort of cloying, stickysweet sentimentality that would make even a marshmallow taste bitter (her specialist trademark, or so it would appear). Painful.

Bad planning leaves me this space to fill with a mention of the eight millionth Corgi reprinting of Arthur C. Clarke's The City And The Stars, one of his best books.

Richard Monaco -- PARSIVAL, OR A KNIGHT'S TALE (Futura, 343pp, £1·25)

Another quasi-medieval Arthurian romance, distinguished from the rest by being set at the close of Arthur's reign and concentrating on the story of Parsival, the Holy Fool who sets out into the world in search of the meaning of life and, encountering pain, corruption, squalor and death, gradually losing his innocence and purity in the process. (Just like each of us, in fact, and the story's essential allegorical truth is undoubtedly the main reason for its persistence down the centuries.) Thus the gradually changing tone of the tale, starting with a mood of lightness and gentle wit and then sliding imperceptibly downhill into one of darkness and squalor (one that, unlike the similar mood in White's The Book Of Merlyn, is of direct relevance to the story) until the final moment of revelation: that ultimate wisdom is not to be found outside us, in some mythical grail, but can only spring from within, as a natural consequence of the examination of self. While Monaco's novel offers no new insight on this theme, it is at least a thoughtful and well-written one, worth your attention. (The only thing marring my appreciation of it is the promise of a sequel picking up the story of one of the subsidiary characters. Why in God's name do writers always seem to feel a need to ruin their novels in this fashion? A novel conceived as a unit should remain as a unit, not be devalued by the creation of an inevitably lacklustre series to follow it.)

Roger Zelazny -- THE COURTS OF CHAOS (Avon, 142pp, $1·75)

Reviewed by Alan Dorey

No doubt this conclusion to the drawn-out Amber saga will be soaked up with unbounded eagerness by devotees, but the only truly redeeming feature of this rough-edged instalment is the relief it gives to those who thought Zelazny was suffering from perpetual verbosity. Nine Princes In Amber, the start of this five-part series, was a pleasant, unambitious, often absorbing sword-and-sorcery novel in which Corwin, prince of Amber, oscillated between latter-day New York and the strange, mystical Amber, and the book always managed to keep its head above water with its logical jig-saw-like approach to plot and characterisation. Family intrigue and brotherly struggles combined with familiar sword-and-sorcery hooks to produce something more than a tedious example of sub-Conan prose.

Unfortunately, Zelazny's concentration lapsed with the follow-up, The Guns Of Avalon, which read like a poor man's guide to creating dull TV scripts. Forget the action, ignore the plot, and people will buy it just because it's part of a series. The Sign Of The Unicorn came next and plumbed the true depths of mediocrity, a unicorn making a self-conscious appearance at the end before we were whisked off and plunger headlong into The Hand Of Oberon. Already the series was too long, even though this fourth episode was sporadically superior to its immediate predecessor. Multi-dimensional chaos led to The Courts Of Chaos, serialised in Galaxy over two years ago, and at last we could see the awesome manifestation of Zelazny's overblown ideas and writing.

From a brave attempt at making formula fiction readable, one-time rebel Zelazny has opted for the easy way out. From genuine writing to rehashed cliches in the space of five books; yet The Courts Of Chaos isn't that grim. If he'd condensed the series, tightened his writing and ideas, it could have made two crisp and readable novels -- not as much money, perhaps, but it would have maintained his credibility. As it stands, The Courts Of Chaos is a doughy, insubstantial piece of writing which will no doubt move from the bookshelves because of its series format. Just don't all rush at once.

Gordon R. Dickson -- THE ALIEN WAY (Sphere, 191pp, 95p)

Reviewed by Keith Plunkett

I was some way into this when I realised that I had actually read it before; so much for its memorability. It's set in the not too distant future (which, shades of the Hoyles, isn't too unlike the present except for the introduction of interstellar travel); unmanned decoy spacecraft are left in interstellar space to be found by any alien race which, against all the odds, just happens to come across them; then, by some means too unlikely to be taken seriously, the minds of the alien discoverers can be linked to human volunteers back on Earth. Jason Barcher is one such volunteer, who is linked to Kator, a scout for the Ruml, a race whose code of ethics makes it difficult for them to coexist peacefully with humanity. It is therefore up to Jason to work out a solution; having done so, it takes him the

rest of the book to convince everyone else of its worth, mainly because they are too stupid to understand it. Consequently, the book is padded out with pseudo-scientific lectures which become tedious and repetitive, and lead up to Dickson's usual "I knew it would happen this way all along" ending.

Rob Holdstock & Chris Priest (eds.) -- STARS OF ALBION (Pan, 238pp, £1·20)

Reviewed by Roz Kaveney

This anthology manages in a perversely interesting way to combine blandness -- not the most standard of British SF's attributes -- with modest excellence. The book takes few risks; the standard story included is well-crafted as far as plotting goes and is written in a style that demonstrates intelligence rather than intensity. It's a very laid back anthology in which Ballard, for example, is represented by "A Place And A Time To Die", that quiet story about two Americans holding off a Chinese horde, rather than, say, one of his Atrocity Exhibition pieces. It's very much a post-New Wave anthology, too -- not that the New Wave is excluded, just that it is represented by those writers associated with it who can be most easily assimilated to the editors' stiff upperlipped view of the British contribution to the genre. Thus we have a goodish Brian Aldiss ("Sober Noises Of Morning In A Marginal Land"), David Masson's "Traveller's Rest", a Barrington Bayley for them as likes him and, thank God, another superb Josephine Saxton story ("Dormant Soul") in print. There is a sub-standard joky Bob Shaw ("The Giaconda Caper") and a particularly good story from Holdstock ("The Time Beyond Age") who is like Saxton way overdue for a collection. Buy the anthology for the Holdstock and the Saxton -- you ought to already own collections which include the rest of what is really good here.

Fredric Brown -- THE MIND THING (Hamlyn, 207pp, 90p)

Alien invasions of Earth are probably SF's ultimate expression of paranoia: that the universe is indeed out to get us, and only a vigilant trigger-finger can ever keep us safe -- although in this case "us" refers mainly to the US, the theme being more an American than a British obsession. This was just the attitude displayed in the American SF of the fifties when, in keeping with the fear of subversion fostered by the McCarthyist anti-Communist hysteria of the time, the aliens didn't fall from the sky in giant spaceships but adapted themselves to look like the ordinary man-in-the-street (Jack Finney's The Body Snatchers and Alan E. Nourse's "The Counterfeit Man") or else eschewed corporeality altogether and took over someone's mind (Cyril M. Kornbluth's "The Mindworm"). (Not that such stories are specifically right-wing, however; they can be interpreted in terms of both left and right, "freedom" being no particular prerogative of either and both being in practice almost indistinguishable from each other.)

The Mind Thing falls inot this latter category but was written after the aforementioned McCarthyist hysteria had largely died away and so is understandably lacking in the bite that characterised the fiction written while the scare was in full swing. Its narrative tone reflects this, being suitably slow-moving and bucolic, although its setting -- the midwestern town of Bartlesville -- is obviously intended to symbolise all that's Good and Decent about Free America. The capitals are deliberate, because this is very much a satire on the whole aliens-turning-into-anything fad: the alien is remarkably stupid, acting largely by blind instinct, incapable of learning from its mistakes and committing elementary blunder after elementary blunder; and its chief human opponent is astonishingly competent, constructing his theory of its nature more by intuitive leaps in the dark than by thorough investigation of the fragmentary clues available; and it's difficult to avoid the conclusion that the alien in intended to embody the supposedly innate inferiority of America's Cold War enemies and the human protagonist the supposed ease with which they may be overcome.

But the satire doesn't really come off, mainly because its length drains it of all its potential and reduces it to the level of a routine adventure. It's almost as though Brown changed his mind in the middle of writing it and started to take it seriously....and in consequence the novel qualifies as but an interesting failure.

Bad planning again, eh wot? Also from Hamlyn: Meteor, a novelisation of the movie by Edmund H. North & Franklin Coen; a competent, unpretentious thriller better by far than the racist, sexist, paranoid wish-fulfillment of the dire Lucifer's Hammer.

Bruce Sterling -- INVOLUTION OCEAN (New English Library, 172pp, 80p)

This was originally the third book in Jove's "Harlan Ellison Discovery" series, and this new edition reprints his introduction to it; mistakenly, since it's quite the most godawful, time-wasting, self-indulgent piece of claptrap I've read in a long time, and is virtually guaranteed to put anyone off the novel itself. Steeling myself for the worst, therefore, I discovered instead an enjoyable, well-written and highly atmospheric story about dust-whaling on the planet Nullaqua, whose only habitable spot is a seventy-miles deep, fifty-miles wide crater settled by religious fanatics some 500 years before (and despite my loathing for Ellison's introduction, I do agree with his contention that it's a remarkably well-realised and memorable world). It has two main themes: the maturation of the narrator, John Newhouse, as an individual, from a dissolute, self-centred drug-trafficker into a responsible, aware, thinking being; and the obsessive quest for knowledge and understanding conducted by the captain of the whaler Lunglance, Nils Desperandum, who is in many ways the novel's main protagonist (and who resembles, to some degree, Herman Melville's Captain Ahab -- as indeed the entire novel bears some comparison with his Moby Dick). Both are depicted as essentially unresolved journeys through drakness into deeper darkness but, perhaps surprisingly, are nowhere near as depressing as that makes it all sound. I recommend it wholeheartedly.

SLEEVE NOTES -- Rob Hansen

There is a contention in some quarters that a thing can be so bad that it transcends its inherent godawfulness and becomes good. It's an interesting proposition and one that could well explain the continuing popularity of Space 1999 and Blake's 7, but can it in any way be applied when considering art? Cynics could argue that Pablo Picasso proved it possible long ago, and from this reviewer at least they would get no argument, but can the same be said of SF cover art?

The cover on the recent NEL edition of A. E. Van Vogt's Empire Of The Atom (by Joe Petagno, I believe) is surpassed in awfulness only by the cover on the previous edition which featured the hugely bloated head of an alien as a blob of garish scarlet that was an instant eye-ache at thirty feet. And yet I have it on no less an authority than Rog Peyton (purveyor of literature to the gentry) that it sold extremely well for that very reason. It was eye-catching and aroused the curiosity of the idle browser. As I said in last issue's column, cover art is a purely functional medium geared to selling the book so by that criterion the cover was entirely successful, which is a sobering thought.

The above is by way of a preamble and brings me to the two books thrust into my hands by Joe Nicholas at the recent Novacon 9. I suppose that in a perfect world the quality of a book's cover would reflect the quality of the contents, in which case these two covers are a step in the right direction, being as ultimately mediocre as the books they grace. The books are Arthur C. Clarke's The City And The Stars and If The Stars Are Gods by Greg Benford and Gordon Eklund, and the covers are boring.

Anyone who's seen Philip Kaufman's excellent remake of Invasion Of The Body Snatchers will recall the opening scene where gelatinous blobs migrate from their homeworld to Earth, soon to metamorphose into pods wherein grow duplicates of human beings. If you can imagine such a gelatinous blob containing an angular black blob with a bad case of acne then you're seeing the cover of The City And The Stars. It's intriguing to imagine the real Diaspar crumbling to dust as its alien duplicate bursts from the pod but with the cover art pummelled into the lower half of the front cover by lettering that takes up three-quarters of the total cover area I'm confident that good will out. Still, flippancy aside, it's better than the cover on The Hitch-Hiker's Guide To The Galaxy, but then what isn't?

Unfortunately, although it's only a couple of months since I read If The Stars Are Gods, it made so little impression on me that I'm not sure if the cover has any relevance to the text or not. Still, even if a hot-air balloon on an SF cover is unusual, the combination of a green blob and a blue blob on a red background doesn't exactly send you shouting for more and ultimately makes as little impression as the novel itself.

And there you have it. Both book covers examined this issue get the thumbs down and no doubt so will many in future. Now what was that Joe said about a five thousand word article for the nest issue on Gollancz covers...?

IS PAPER GOING OUT OF STYLE?

Judging by the sheer quantity of material that's been pouring from the publishers over the past two or three months, the answer is an unqualified "yes". So herewith a listing of all the books I didn't have room for review, with comments where appropriate:

Frederik Pohl -- THE AGE OF PUSSYFOOT (Panther, 187pp, 95p): social and scientific extrapolation okay for when it was first written (Galaxy serial, 1965-66) but let down by the plotting, which consists of its revived-corpsicle protagonist ignoring everyone's advice and stumbling from one crisis to another, the whole constituting a guided tour of a 26th century utopia. // Robert Silverberg -- STEPSONS OF TERRA (Sphere, 158pp, 90p): reissue of another of his early novels, about a man sent to persuade Earth to come to aid of colony-planet of Corwin but finding Earth has no aid to give; deep. // Harry Harrison -- THE STAINLESS STEEL RAT WANTS YOU (Sphere, 191pp, 95p): fourth in the series, disappointingly tired and flaccid; Slippery Jim diGriz is showing his age, and should retire before he completely destroys his earlier reputation. // Michael Bishop -- STOLEN FACES (Sphere, 158pp, 95p): his third novel, badly marred by its sudden shift of viewpoint towards the end; otherwise pretty ace stuff. // Philip K. Dick -- SOLAR LOTTERY (Arrow, 188pp, 95p): for some reason this reprint omits the author's prefaratory note on Game Theory, which provides much of the novel's rationale; otherwise a competent if unexceptional early novel. // Clifford D. Simak -- A HERITAGE OF STARS (Magnum, 219pp, 95p): at one point in its quest for "The Place of Going to the Stars", this threatened to become a plea for the continuation of the manned space programme; then up popped the friendly aliens and the garrulous robot and Simak lapsed back into the pastoralist crackerbarrel philosophising that's been his constant trademark. // Alfred Bester -- THE DEMOLISHED MAN (Penguin, 191pp, 85p): for me, marginally less brilliant than Tiger! Tiger!, but no less a classic; buy! // Ed McBain -- TOMORROW AND TOMORROW (Sphere, 190pp, 95p): routine semi-thriller by the author of the 87th Precinct novels whose Vicarionist vs. Realist "battle of morals" was probably okay for its time (1956) but is now hopelessly dated. // Brian M. Stableford -- THE CITY OF THE SUN (Hamlyn, 153pp, 85p): fourth of the Daedalus books, with even less biology lectures than the third and also rather less plot; the resolution of the problem faced by the Daedalus's crew verges too closely on the arbitrary and the whole thing falls anticlimactically flat. // Piers Anthony -- CASTLE ROOGNA (Futura/Del Rey, 329pp, 90p): third of the Xanth books, this time featuring Dor, son of the first two's Bink and Chameleon, who seems even more halfwitted than they -- unless it's Anthony himself who's the halfwit, his brain rotted away by his vegetarain diet of nuts and berries; his attitude to sex is that of a prepubescent schoolboy sniggering over airbrushed Playboy centrefolds and his sense of humour so reliant on weak puns a la Spider Robinson as to severely strain my patience (would you believe a cottage made of cheese?); cretinous beyond any conceivable possibility of redemption. // Greg Benford & Gordon Eklund -- IF THE STARS ARE GODS (Sphere, 202pp, £1·10): a quasi-novel cobbled together from a series of novelettes; the future of the space programme &c., featuring a cast of cardboard cutouts and some aliens -- well, look, it isn't quite as bad as all that; it's just that the authors have a lot of ambition but no notion of how to fulfill it. // E. E. "Doc" Smith -- THE BLACK KNIGHT OF THE IRON SPHERE (Star, 140pp, 95p): third of the Lord Tedric novels -- why are Star not crediting Gordon Eklund as the rightful coauthor? Particularly as the title was probably his invention....I mean, you don't often see titles like that no more, eh wot? Probably just as well.... // John Briley -- THE LAST DANCE (Arrow, 217pp, £1·10): look, I have a very clear memory of reading this....but no recollection of what it was all about. Heigh-ho. // Olaf Stapledon -- SIRIUS (Penguin, 188pp, 85p): about time they got this one back into print; classic stuff. // Leon Stover & Harry Harrison (eds.) -- APEMAN, SPACEMAN (Penguin, 376pp, £1·25): reprint of a so-so anthology of SF stories with an anthropological slant, plus various non-fiction bits; guess which I found more interesting. // Fred & Geoffrey Hoyle -- INFERNO (Penguin, 170pp, 85p): written in 1978, but its first few chapters present a view of Britain owing more to 1958; what happened after that I've no idea, since I gave up. // Paul Adler -- SAUCER HILL (Avon, 203pp, $1·95): the fact that I haven't this to hand right now must mean I passed it on to someone else for review; next time, with any luck. // Trevor Hoyle -- EARTH CULT (Panther, 189pp, 95p): as per the previous book. // Patricia & Lionel Fanthorpe -- THE BLACK LION (Greystoke Mowbray, 159pp, 95p): this, too, will be reviewed next time -- by me, no less!

Alphabetical order? Look, why don't you just sod off and pester Alan Dorey, or something.... The end of the page, the end of the year, the end of the decade. So?