PAPERBACK PARLOUR

Volume 3, Number 4 -- a BSFA publication edited by Joseph Nicholas, who has finally moved from Camberley and now lives at ROOM 9, 94 ST GEORGE'S SQUARE, PIMLICO, LONDON SW1Y 3QY. Would publishers therefore please amend their records accordingly (and everyone else too, for that matter). Although I have made arrangements with the Post Office for mail to be forwarded from the old address, not everything is getting through. Which, I suppose, is more or less typical.

As from next issue, the title of the magazine will be changed to Paperback Inferno mainly because the current title has always struck me as much too twee and cosy for the style of reviewing I and "my" reviewers practice. The new one will be, I think, much more indicative of what goes on within these pages.

As for this issue, however....weight restrictions due to increased postal charges have conspired to exclude my planned reviews of magazine short fiction -- again! Next time, folks (and where have you heard that before?). Otherwise, there are reviews by Alan Dorey, Ian Maule, Janice Maule, me and, if they come through in time, Roz Kaveney and Keith Plunkett. Have fun.

Philip K. Dick -- A HANDFUL OF DARKNESS (Panther, 185pp, 95p)

The one and only previous UK paperback edition of this collection was also from Panther, but in 1966, and it seems astonishing that it should have been out of print for so long, particularly in respect of its "historical significance": it was in fact Dick's first book, a collection of some of his first stories, including the great (and much-anthologised) "Impostor", which now reads like a try-out for all the subjective reality-shuffling work that was to follow. Having said all that, however, it has to be admitted that nonoe of the stories are particularly memorable; dating from the "false boom" period of the early fifties, they all rely too much on the standard pulp "twist-in-the-tail" approach of the time to have anything other than the most transient of effects upon the reader. (I'm looking at the contents page's list of titles at this very moment, and having great difficulty in remembering what some of the stories were actually about.) But you are urged to buy it regardless, simply on the grounds that it was Dick's first book, and your collection will be incomplete without it.

David Weir -- THE WATER MARGIN (Star, 301pp, £1·50)

Remember that nuttily-dubbed Japanese TV series screened here a couple of years ago? For my sins, I rather liked it, and so couldn't pass this book by. It's not, thankfully, a straight novelisation of the series but then neither, as far as I can tell from my limited knowledge of them, is it a straight translation of the original legends, instead occupying a position somewhere between them. In what is (I suppose) typical Chinese fashion, it has an enormous cast of characters (so many that Weir provides a list of them at the front of the book), lots of philosophical discursions about the Tao and its relevance to Chinese life of

the period (discursions which do have some bearing on the story rather than being mere aphorisms thrown in for the hell of it), and, perhaps surprisingly for its subject-matter, very little action (what there is of it is usually glossed over in favour of developing the story, which is all to the good since a swordfight is, in the main, a swordfight, and too many of them are simply tedious. Now you know why I find sword-and-sordidry fiction so boring). The main thing it has going for it, however, is its style: Weir may not be a particularly outstanding writer, but his tongue is firmly in his cheek throughout and in consequence The Water Margin is infused with a marvellously ironic sense of fun. Recommended to all those with a taste for the cutre.

Ursula K. LeGuin -- THE WORD FOR WORLD IS FOREST (Panther, 128pp, 95p)

"(This book) won a Hugo Award in 1973" says the blurb, cannily forgetting to say exactly which Hugo. All right then (and as you'd expect from the page-count): best novella, it having originally appeared in Harlan Ellison's Again, Dangerous Visions and now, like everything else in that less-then-blockbusting anthology, looking terribly dated. Its twin themes are ecology and the Vietnam War, and while there's no doubt that the story into which they are woven is a beautifully written one, they no longer have the impact they once did. Nor are they helped by the story's plot: a Monty Pythonesque interstellar lumberjack operation, by God, and I had trouble keeping a straight face even at the best of times. Never mind trouble believing that anyone could possibly be mug enough to pay 95p for a mere 128 pages.

Jack Vance -- SLAVES OF THE KLAU (Coronet, 126pp, 85p)

Another very thin book, originally published in a 1952 issue of Space Stories and then as half of an Ace Double in 1958 -- although from its tone it could equally as well have been published in Astounding, the plot revolving around the xenophobic Campbellian notion that one lone Earthman is inherently superior to any number of smelly old aliens, presented without, surprisingly for Vance, the slightest trace of humour or irony (the lack of which causes me to wonder if this represented any attempt of his to actually sell to Campbell). The story thus lies dead upon the page, devoid of colour or emotion, and is recommended for completists only.

Ian Watson -- MIRACLE VISITORS (Panther, 256pp, £1·00)

"Sheer inventiveness", "intellectually exciting", "supremely skilful", "stimulating and strangely plausible": just some of the praise lavished on this book by various newspapers and magazines and quoted on its back cover, and it all strikes me as grossly misplaced. Although the initial premise of Miracle Visitors, concerning the "true" nature of UFOs -- which, according to Watson, have only a subjective reality, being called into existence because of our need to believe in them -- is of some interest, its development is woefully inadequate. Watson, having obviously taken to heart the old Campbellian dictum of "the idea is hero", has failed to realise that for those ideas to be successful they must be dramatised as fiction, not stated as quasi-fact; and instead of a coherently and logically plotted novel he's given us a seemingly interminable series of lectures on the metaphysics of consciousness which, Heinlein-like, admit of no dissenting viewpoint and decline into tedious repetitiveness long before the end. (Except for odd flashes of presumably unintentional humour: in Part Three, roughly halfway through, a Ford Thunderbird car transforms itself into a spaceship and makes a round trip from the Earth to the Moon, and I laughed so hard I nearly fell out of my chair.) Miracle Visitors is, in short, utter garbage, and when it's compared with his previous novels it's apparent that Watson, having started so well with The Embedding, has since grown steadily worse. Either he rededicates himself to the task of writing, or in five years' time he could well find himself without any readers at all.

Robert Sheckley -- THE WONDERFUL WORLD OF ROBERT SHECKLEY (Sphere, 209pp, £1·00)

This is, although he doesn't say as much in his introduction, Sheckley's own selection of his "best" short stories; and a decidedly unbalanced selection it is too, the majority dating from the fifties with but one each from 1965 and 1968 and nothing from his "revival" period of the seventies (although it's possible that he felt himself to have too little perspective on the stories written then to make any halfway objective choice). As a "best" anthology, therefore, it reprints material from all his previous collections, and those already in possession of them should

pass this one by; but for those unfamiliar with his work, this -- including as it does such stories as "Specialist", "The People Trap", "Pilgrimage To Earth" and "The Store Of The Worlds" -- should serve as a useful introduction to it.

Karl Alexander -- TIME AFTER TIME (Panther, 320pp, £1·25)

Reviewed by Alan Dorey

Do not despair; this is not another movie potboiler written by yet another sub-Alan Dead Foster clone. The movie itself is praiseworthy, but many of the subtleties of this, the original book, were lost in the transition to the big screen. It is of course derived from the classic novella "The Time Machine", and from it we learn that the traveller is none other than H. G. Wells himself, and that his best friend Leslie Stevenson is really Jack the Ripper, the notorious Whitechapel murderer of 1893(!). Stevenson, present at Wells's demonstration of the machine, already fears for his life at the hands of the London constabulary and so steals the device to make his escape to the San Francisco of 1979. Wells, fearing the damage that Stevenson may cause to his vision of a future utopia, sets out in hot pursuit. There thus follows a fast-paced and action-filled chase across this "bizarre new world of cops, credit cards and cocaine". Although Wells would have been ashamed of such an alliterative statement, we must not give up: copywriters always tend to sensationalise for commerciality's sake.

Alexander writes very much in the style of Wells; he is never condescending to the great man, nor does he generate a mere carbon-copy: the reader is given a strong impression of his admiration for Wells, and that this is a pastiche lovingly created by a keen and enthusiastic scholar of his life and times. References to such pepper the plot like buckshot on a hot tin roof, but unless you've read much Wells many of these mot justes will seem irrelevent (a criticism levelled at the book by several people whom one would assume should have known better). But you will at least learn that Wells's father did play cricket at county level (and quite well too), that Wells himself was once a draper's assistant in Bromley, and that he eventually married a Miss Amy Robbins. Time After Time is, in sum, amusing, entertaining, but never too derivative. Alexander obviously enjoyed writing it, and for the pleasure that this feeling alone offers us, we should rest content.

Robert Silverberg -- THE FEAST OF ST. DIONYSUS (Coronet, 255pp, 95p)

Much as I like Silverberg, I find it extraordinarily difficult to say anything -- praise, condemnation, or otherwise -- about this collection. This may well be a natural consequence of the nature of its contents, a very mixed bag of five stories dating from the early and middle seventies, at least one of which -- "Schwartz Between The Galaxies", about a twenty-first century anthropologist on an Earth devoid of cultural diversity taking refuge in a dream-world of a starship full of aliens from different races -- is bloody marvellous, and at least two of which -- "Trips", about a man searching for alternative versions of his wife through an infinitude of parallel universe San Franciscos; and "In The House Of Double Minds", about children who've had their cerebral hemispheres separated by laser surgery and are being trained as oracles -- are pretty poor: the former because Silverberg devotes more time to descriptions of his alternative San Franciscos than to his protagonist's state of mind; and the latter because it's only half a story: having established the situation, he runs out of ideas and comes to an abrupt halt without resolving anything (and the story seems to exist for the sole purpose of describing the split-brain hypothesis). The other two, the title story and "This Is The Road", are simply tedious; short on theme, idea and plot but very long on words. Perhaps his decision to stop writing once he'd used up all the ideas in his mental file, made about the time he was working on these stories, caused him not to try his hardest; and if so then the loss is his as well as ours.

Patricia & Lionel Fanthorpe -- THE BLACK LION (Greystoke Mowbray, 159pp, 95p)

Gosh, just look at that cover! A half-naked woman with thighs as thick as tree-trunks suspended by chains from her wrists being menaced by an overmuscled barbarian with a gigantic phallic broadsword, apparently painted by a ten-year-old who knows not the finer points of anatomy and such. And fairly indicative of the contents, in fact, sword-and-sordidry fiction being high on sublimated sexual fetishism -- whips, chains, leather, fur, feathers and whathaveyou -- and low on sense. The rationale it all is lifted straight from Edgar Rice Burroughs (he being, apparently, Patricia

Fanthorpe's favourite author): Mark Sable, alienated ex-convict, is given a talisman by an old man he's never seen before and is instantly transported to the planet Derl, where he is equally instantly hailed as the Black Lion, the rightful king of Dar, and sets off to destroy his foes and reclaim his throne. Which is probably where Lionel Fanthorpe lent his hand: every twenty or thirty pages there's a fight of some description, with monsters, sub-men or other men, and as a result it all becomes even more predictable than it would otherwise have been. There's no real ending to it, either; as the first of a trilogy, it simply grinds to a halt with (surprise!) another fight in the offing. Tedious.

Harry Harrison -- BILL, THE GALACTIC HERO (Avon, 185pp, $1·75)

Whoever painted the cover didn't read the book properly: Bill did indeed wind up with two left arms, but the second was as a replacement for his right arm. However: Bill, The Galactic Hero is of course an absolute classic, a brilliantly funny parody of Asimov's Trantor, Heinlein's starship troopers, and a great many more of the conservative militaristic cliches with which Campbellian SF was preoccupied. If your collection lacks a copy of this book then you are clearly beyond hope, and should remove yourself forthwith from the face of this planet.

Henry Kuttner -- CLASH BY NIGHT (Hamlyn, 215pp, 95p)

Hamlyn has apparently acquired the rights to virtually all of Kuttner's work and was intending to reprint it over the next few years; but rumour has it that the paperback division is soon to fold and that this will be the last book they'll publish (and because they'll still hold the rights to Kuttner's work, no one else will be able to reprint it for some time to come). In his introduction to it, Peter Pinto states that he's "re-edited the collections to eliminate annoying overlaps, to make up the books to convenient lengths, and to collect stories in the same series into the same volumes" -- all of which is of course now academic and in fact doesn't apply to this book anyway, since the stories in it have nothing in common beyond being written by Kuttner (except for "Vintage Season", which was written in collaboration with his wife, Catherine L. Moore). They are, as one might expect, nowhere near as good now as they appeared then; for all that Kuttner, unlike many of his contemporaries, concentrated more on his characters than his concepts, not even the obvious strength of his writing can save his stories -- concerned as they are with the traditional pulp impedimenta of robots, aliens, time-travel and such -- from datedness. In which respect the three worst are "When The Bough Breaks", "Juke-Box" and "The Ego Machine": fun, but little else; the title story is somewhat better, although its commentary on man's attitudes to war is severely hampered by the basic absurdities of its background rationale (too complex to detail here); while the best story in the collection is the fifth and last, the aforementioned "Vintage Season", concerned with a group of people from the future who have travelled back in time to witness a disaster in their distant past -- a notion which sounds ridiculous when stated so baldly, but has been skillfully carried off.

William Hope Hodgson -- CARNACKI THE GHOST-FINDER (Sphere, 240pp, £1·00)

What Lovecraft and others have labelled as "supernatural horror", and consisting mainly of stories about ghosts, devils and things going bump in the night, usually bores me to tears, but Hodgson is an exception because I encountered him -- and these stories in particular -- at an age young enough to be impressed by his "originality" (or so it seemed to me then). At least, he used to be an exception; rereading these stories now I'm struck, not by their top-heavy freight of pseudo-scientific gobbledegook (astral vibration, electric pentacles, spectrum defences), which was in any case fairly typical of the horror fiction of the pre-Great War period, but by the boyish clubland tone which I originally failed to notice: lots of frightfully decent chaps willing to have a jolly good go, and no women. (Or almost no women: the one in "The Whistling Room" remains offstage throughout, and that in "The Horse Of The Invisible" does nothing but scream and faint whenever anything drastic happens. Is my memory playing tricks, or was this latter story made into a TV play several years ago?) The narrative technique is typical of clubland fiction: Carnacki investigates and solves a haunting, then later tells his friends about it over brandy and cigars, Hodgson styling himself as the friend who writes it all down. On top of which the actual subject-matter of the stories often differs only in respect of minor details and lacks adequate resolutions; in his introduction, Gerald Suster claims that this latter is indicative of Carnacki's

human fallibility ("I don't know"), but it looks to me more like a weakness on Hodgson's part. If I sound cynical about this book it's probably due to the unwritten rule about never going back; as H. E. Bates once so succinctly put it: "The past is a different country, and besides, they do things differently there." Those to whom the stories are new, however, could well find them of some interest and entertainment.

Ann Maxwell -- A DEAD GOD DANCING (Avon, 281pp, $2.25)

Reviewed by Janice Maule

The publisher's blurb gives one the impression that this is a fantasy novel -- an unfortunate error which is compounded by its title. It is actually an SF novel, with the emphasis on character and culture rather than technology.

The central characters are a team of five humans, selected by computer as the optimum group to evacuate a handful of people remaining on a planet about to be destroyed by its sun going nova. The task must be accomplished without revealing the existence of the Concorde -- the federation of planets -- and within a very limited time-span. The mission is further complicated by the team's interpersonal tensions -- which both advance the plot and reveal their depths of character -- and the resolution of the plot is in fact intimately dependent upon their resolution.

In addition to the effective characterisations, the novel is fleshed out with well-thought-out descriptions of the planet's geography, flora and fauna, and their relationship to its inhabitants' culture. A Dead God Dancing is a well-rounded and ultimately engrossing novel which deserves more attention than it is likely to get if readers confronted with it probe no further than its cover blurb, and it would be nice if a British publisher were to accept it for reprinting in the UK.

Michael Moorcock (ed.) -- THE TRAPS OF TIME (Penguin, 207pp, 85p)

This was first published in hardback in 1968 and then reprinted in paperback in 1970, and I really can't see the point of reprinting it now. Some of the stories are very good indeed -- particularly Aldiss's "Man In His Time", Ballard's "Mr F Is Mr F", Disch's "Now Is Forever", Jones's "The Great Clock" and Masson's "Traveller's Rest" -- but for all their similarity of theme (the nature of time and man's relationship to it), they, and Zelazny's boring "Divine Madness" can all be found in collections by the authors themselves; collections that any self-respecting fan should already possess. Only Collyn's "Unification Day" -- a definite oddity since it's a parallel universe story and has nothing to do with time -- and Harness's "Time Trap" -- a truly dire piece lifted from a 1947 Astounding and actually reprinted in a 1965 New Worlds -- remain uncollected; and it's hardly worth buying this book just for them, Borges's "The Garden Of Forking Paths", and Alfred Jarry's witless "essay" on the construction and operation of a time machine.

Keith Laumer & Rosel George Brown -- EARTHBLOOD (Coronet, 288pp, 95p)

This is inexcusable: Keith Laumer's name on the cover in huge white letters and Rosel George Brown's in small white ones, implying that it was mainly Laumer's work when the opposite is in fact the case. Presumably Coronet felt that her name was less saleable; but if they ever reprint it they should let the sales figures go hang and give the credit where it is properly due. As for the story: it's a galaxy-spanning epic about Roan, a genetically pure human male fighting his way through a chaotic interregnum dominated by aliens, mutants and half-breeds to discover the secret of his birthright and rebuild Terran power; by the end of the book he's got the former and cleared the stage for the latter, which is not at all surprising. Despite its inherent predictability -- and the horrible drawback that all the aliens seem to talk like Brooklyn gangsters -- it is in patches reasonably entertaining, and can be recommended to all those with nothing better to read on a rainy Sunday afternoon.

Christopher Priest (ed.) -- ANTICIPATIONS (Pan, 214pp, 95p)

Original anthologies have a theoretical advantage over the magazines in that their editors are not under pressure to fill their pages once every month and so can afford to pick and choose to get the best stories they can (the unfortunate corollary of which is that they tend to pick stories by established writers, presumably on the grounds that the eventual audience for the book is completely unknown and has

to be wooed with familiar names -- although this could of course be a reflection of the original anthology concept after the destruction wrought by Roger Elwood, who flooded the market with about eighty different versions of it, most filled with stories by new and untried writers, all competing with each other and all inevitably losing money). Despite which some pretty duff material still manages to slip through -- in this instance, Harry Harrison's "The Greening Of The Green", the breakneck speed of whose plotting can't disguise the basic silliness of its denouement: the development of telekinesis amongst the Irish because they have a better sense of humour than everyone else; and Robert Sheckley's "Is That What People Do?", which uses that tedious old ordinary-man-accidentally-stumbles-across-strange-alien-gadget-and-is-eventually-eaten-by-it plot and still sends the reader to sleep regardless of the wit with which Sheckley's infused it.

These two are, thankfully, counterbalanced by almost everything else, which is at least good and sometimes excellent -- particularly J. G. Ballard's "One Afternoon At Utah Beach" and Chris Priest's own "The Negation", both of which are concerned with that hazy borderline between reality and dream and both of which approach it in entirely different ways: Ballard through the playing-out of his protagonist's obsessive World War Two fantasies, and Priest through his protagonist's fascination with the imaginary worlds of fiction. This latter is, suitably enough, another in his Dream Archipelago sequence, and has the thought-provokingly enigmatic ending we've come to expect of him -- has Dik crossed the wall to freedom? Why is the wall there anyway? And is there even a war being fought across it in any case? "The Negation" is the best story in the book, with "One Afternoon At Utah Beach" a very close second.

Of the remaining four stories, only one really stands out -- Brian Aldiss's "A Chinese Perspective", a playful piece about the relative merits of computerised horoscopes and the I Ching set amongst the frenetically inventive Zodiacal Planets and on the torpid Chinese-dominated Earth; but it is essentially too playful, seeming to indulge itself in self-conscious philosophising simply for the hell of it and giving the reader no useful insight into those philosophies. Otherwise: Thomas M. Disch's "Mutability" is extracted from a novel in progress and, although an excellent character-study of (some of?) its protagonists which augurs well for the finished work, is too incomplete to be of any great interest in itself; Bob Shaw's "Ampitheatre" is a competent but unexceptional adventure on an alien planet; and in Ian Watson's "The Very Slow Time Machine" the idea, as one would expect, is everything -- it's an interesting idea, to be sure, but the story is so lacking in any depth of feeling as to arouse not the slightest shred of sympathy in the reader.

Overall, therefore, is Anticipations a good anthology? I'd answer "yes" (but with the reservations expressed above); as Priest states in his introduction: "....this is not just a collection of short stories, but is more accurately described as a book of writers" and the stories are in many ways representative of their authors. To quote Priest again: "I'm emphasising the writerly nature of this book because I feelthis has been an area of neglect in science fiction." Too true; it's about time we started talking about the writers as writers rather than picking over the contents of their stories -- which, in view of all the foregoing, makes me as guilty as all hell.

Trevor Hoyle -- EARTH CULT (Panther, 189pp, 95p)

Reviewed by Ian Maule

A few years ago one of the more informed members of the SF "fraternity" told me that Trevor Hoyle was the pen-name used by a group of struggling northern writers. Now I know that Trevor Hoyle is in fact a real person, but I think he's still struggling. From a literary point of view. Earth Cult is competently written, with a minimum of frills; from an SF angle, it's apparent that the book creaks along from one cliche to another with a little sex thrown in here and there in an attempt to retain the reader's interest. It's the story of a scientific journalist's involvement in such exciting local happenings as storms, mutations, earth tremors, new religions and other run-of-the-mill everyday events while attempting to write a routine report on a government research project, and being eventually transformed into a mountain. This is presumably Hoyle's attempt to give new meaning to the phrase "thick as a brick", but the joke comes too late to save the book -- and the reader -- from the jaws of boredom.