



# SF COMMENTARY

No. 68

March 1990

DAVE LANGFORD  
MICHAEL TOLLEY  
COLIN STEELE

Brian Aldiss  
Damien Broderick  
Ned Brooks  
Suzy McKee Charnas  
Cy Chauvin  
Buck Coulson  
Hal Hall  
Jack Herman  
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Andy Sawyer

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## PINLIGHTERS

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For the first time in 21 years, I'm stuck with an Editorial without anything to say. All the good bits (all the bits that are interesting to me) go in 'I Must Be Talking to My Friends' (The Metaphysical Review). In this, my magazine about sf and fantasy, I don't have much in general to say about these genres that I haven't said many times before. You know my line: ignore the junk; search out the good stuff; tell us what you find.

I've enlisted three columnists this time -- Dave Langford from England, Mike Tolley from Adelaide, and Colin Steele from Canberra. I won't turn away anybody else who wants to join the crew. My own column can wait till next issue.

Response to SF Commentary 67 has been good. Some optimistic souls have even thrown a subscription into their letters to keep the revived beast on its feet. Maybe it's slipping. Everything in this issue was on diskette by September 1989. Come March 1990 before the issue appears. Paying work has been plentiful, but time and finance for publishing fanzines has not been. But I still have a Planned Schedule. Thanks to all for your patience.

Here are the letters that fit:

DAVID LAKE

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About your review of my The Changelings of Chaan and West of the Moon -- I agree with you that The Changelings of Chaan is the better book. But you may not know that it is actually the later book, my last book, in fact (probably in both senses of 'last'). Hyland House published them in reverse order because they too preferred Changelings. West of the Moon was written about 1982.

I like your comments about More Than Human and Gene Wolfe.

I could never see More Than Human as anything more than a piece of embarrassing sentimentalism -- that was always Sturgeon's weakness. Actually, I dislike all stories about Superkids, but I dislike them in different ways: Stapledon's Odd John and Clarke's Childhood's End are at least not sentimental.

Gene Wolfe is a marvellous mannerist, but I have never yet penetrated his manner and reached anything solid that I could respect at the heart of his work. Like you, I can't make much of the fifth book of the tetralogy. Yes, obviously Severian is doing a Second Coming, either in the far future or the far past. But I couldn't care less which it is, and the 'Christianity' of the epic seems to me only a matter of flaunted symbols. I haven't read Soldier of the Mist, but if it's as silly as Free Live Free I obviously haven't missed anything.

I also agree about Little, Big. I liked Crowley's Beasts, but I found Little, Big a dead bore. I finished it, because I kept hoping the basic idea of the mansion would deliver something. It didn't.

(11 May 1989)

I liked Free Live Free, but have not read it the obligatory second time. Even if I dote on a piece of fiction by Gene Wolfe, I need to read it a second time to find out what it is about. In the meantime, I treasure Free Live Free's image of a Spruce Goose continually circling the Earth, never landing, for fifty years.

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## HOW TO RECEIVE FUTURE ISSUES

Probably you're receiving this only because you made some response to Number 67. (This includes a few FAPA members; thanks for your mailing comments.) If you subscribed, thanks very much. Also thanks to letter writers, contributors, whingers (at least one fanzine editor who insisted on trading for both SFC and TMR), publishers of review copies and traded fanzines, and a few others.

But if you're seeing SF Commentary for the first time, and want more:

- \* Subscribe (Australia: \$A25 for 6 issues; USA: US\$30 for 5 airmail; Britain: £15 for 5 airmail). Send your subscription in US or GB bank notes or by cheque addressed to 'Bruce Gillespie', already converted to Australian dollars.
- \* Contributors (3 free issues for each article, review or publishable letter of comment).
- \* Fanzine traders who wish to receive SF Commentary instead of The Metaphysical Review. If you absolutely insist on receiving both -- ho hum -- try me.

I need reviewers -- people who will actually write the reviews they promise when they receive free books. I'd prefer short reviews (3-4 well-chosen paragraphs) to theses. Long articles on sf and fantasy will usually appear in TMR.

PATRICK MCGUIRE

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All the way down to the very last sentence, Michael Tolley ('Bear With Me', SFC 67) had me wondering why he was bothering with such a detailed analysis of Greg Bear's work. The usual reason, at least in sf circles, for undertaking such a task is because you like an author's work. Failing that, one might find looking at such an author illuminating of, say, a social or literary trend or of a society removed from us in space or time. Or, as in the case of Martin Bridgstock's Gor study in TMR, the popularity of an author might seem to require analysis in much the spirit that one might approach, say, Mein Kampf or The State and Revolution. From his last sentence I deduce that Tolley finds virtues in Bear that make him willing to put up with a good deal along the way. I wish he'd spent much more time identifying that good side of Bear's work. Perhaps I would like Bear's work better myself. I gave up halfway through Eon as there wasn't enough of a story to make me swallow the premises. It sounds from summaries as if the same thing is true of Bear's other books: detailed and rational elaboration of a premise the author hasn't ever got us to swallow. I think much the same thing happened with Vernor Vinge's The Witting. On several occasions, as in The Forever War, Joe Haldeman gets past such initial implausibilities only by keeping things moving so fast that we don't have time to think about them. Bear ought to try either devoting more space and effort to rationalizing his initial concepts, or to seeing if he couldn't get a better story by toning them down. Much of the Heinlein Revolution consisted in biting off a smaller chunk of wonder, but chewing it a whole lot better.

I am fourteen down your rank-ordered books before I encounter one I have even gotten through (Fire Watch). I enjoyed Fire Watch, like most of Connie Willis's early work, but for some reason I found Lincoln's Dreams unfinishable.

I read, and liked, the first two Sheckleys, in about 18th and 19th places. I couldn't finish Always Coming Home; struck me as preachy and smug. Read some of the stories from All the Traps of Earth elsewhere. My reaction to Simak is ambivalent; I don't think I mind his melancholy conclusions so much as the passivity with which many of his characters meet their fates, the resignation with which they settle into ruts. I also have trouble with his style and, in recent works, with the lack of interest in making things plausible.

You have about 57 titles in your report, though nine of them come in the one great gob of Carr anthologies, so now we're getting into your mid-range, where I start seeing books that I might want to keep an eye out for -- Tool of the Trade, Matilda at the Speed of Light, and The Witches of Eastwick.

Vance books are 45th-47th place, so we're obviously now well on the down side of your list. Or some would think, except that you're campaigning for a reprint of Whatever Happened to Emily Goode After the Great Exhibition in 48th place. So maybe, like me, you have to like a book to some degree before you'll finish it, meaning the whole list should be regarded as one of the books with your approval.

I'm down to Silverberg and I'm seeing a trend here. About half the stuff on your list that I've read is books I read in about the early 1970s, most of it first published then, though some, like the Sheckley, earlier works. It's a regular trip down memory lane, Bruce. But are you just getting around to these things now? If so, why? -- changing tastes or difficulties of access in Oz? Or are these rereadings? I don't offhand note any indication of that. As far as I can remember, I didn't finish Tom O'Bedlam, the recent Silverberg on your list, but then, I'm not positive I started it.

My main obligation was to cover, in the best way possible, the review copies that had been sent me. Gollancz sends me lots of books, and recently the company

has reprinted a lot of interesting sf from the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, some as 'Gollancz SF Classics' and some as VGSF paperbacks. The books I had read in the last 20 years I recalled as best I could. Some I read for the first time (the Ballard collections; the Checkleys). Some I put aside for a first reading; no doubt they'll be reprinted yet again by the time I review them. The truth is that in the last 30 years I've failed to read many of the 'classics' of sf because I haven't had the time.

Unless there are more variant titles than the Science Fiction Encyclopedia lists, the Merril anthology you mention in your entry on Dangerous Visions was entitled England Swings SF. I remember discussing with Yulii Kagarlitskii in Moscow in 1975 how to translate that. He was taking 'SF' to be the object of the verb 'Swings'; it somehow seemed to me that the 'SF' was being used adverbially (England Swings in Science Fiction). I remember singing a few lines of the original song, which I don't think he'd heard.

Look, Bruce, from your pinko Oz perspective, I'm a certifiable 'fascist' -- I voted for Reagan twice. I know a right-wing, militarist work when I see one. Ender's Game is not such a work. Or at least, you'd have to do a lot of argument that the author doesn't believe his own ending, doesn't believe even his own sequel, and is really enjoying far too much that which he pretends to deplore. Since you don't even attempt to make such an argument, I'm tempted to believe you didn't even finish the book, thereby missing Card's point, and didn't even come clean and admit your evaluation was based on a partial reading.

Yes, I read the ending of Ender's Game, but I was also reacting to the emotional tone of the whole. It was the training scheme, occupying much of the book, that I objected to, but was interesting enough to keep me reading. The book contains nothing but various types of brutalization. There's no irony in the writing itself, despite the 'aw shucks, weren't we naughty' tone of the end.

I'm surprised you have trouble with Gene Wolfe. Lord knows I have trouble with Gene Wolfe, but I've always thought this was because he was such a 'literary' writer, emphasizing the sides of the art that you, Bruce, liked. Of course, I do find Wolfe infinitely more readable than, say, Michael Bishop, which means that every now and again I give Wolfe another try, and perhaps one of these days the light will dawn.

As Dave Langford says elsewhere in this issue of SFC (p. 22), Gene Wolfe makes even the most astute reader (and I'm not one of them) feel 'thick'. Wolfe has a devotion to literary gamesmanship that accelerates him way ahead of simple souls like me. Often I find myself out of sympathy with his characters, but -- to take your example -- in sympathy with Michael Bishop's. I don't think Bishop is a good novelist, but I enjoy his short stories very much. But I'm also a great fan of Gene Wolfe's short stories, because when I read them a second time usually I see what he is getting at.

I think the human race is divided into people whose nervous systems are somewhat overstrung and those whose nervous systems are somewhat understrung (presumably with a small quantity of 'just rights' in the middle). The understrungs find extra stimulation pleasurable, whether in wonderful horribleness from Sturgeon (or the entire horror fiction genre, or a lot of the mainstream) or from skydiving. The overstrungs find that the ordinary stresses of life are plenty to keep the adrenalin flowing. From their amusements they seek not more thrills but something soothing or distracting, and such people find it hard to see what is wonderful about horribleness in the first place. I am curiously pleased to find that you and the anonymous recent commentators find something wrong with Sturgeon, this hitherto-unquestioned pillar of the genre.

(17-29 May 1989)

I like all the early Sturgeon short stories I've read, but a reading of More Than Human over ten years ago still leaves a sour taste in the mouth. I'm an

overstrung person who finds the ordinary stresses of life so tedious that I want a superior type of overstrungness from good fiction. Sturgeon's sin in More Than Human was not his subject matter, unpleasant though he made it, but the way he threw words around. Many found Sturgeon's prose in More Than Human poetic and uplifting. I didn't.

NED FROGGE

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I do think you should give Orson Scott Card another chance. I agree with your feelings about the militarism of Ender's Game, but having been present at Card's last 'Secular Humanist Revival', I can hardly believe that he is any sort of fascist. Try the continuation of the story of Ender Wiggins in Speaker for the Dead to see what Ender becomes. I had my own objections to these books, but it had to do with style rather than content. I have not read all of Card's books, but I prefer his fantasy. Hart's Hope comes mainly to mind. Wyrm falls in between -- sf with strong fantasy elements.

Despite what I said in SFC 67, of course I should read some more Card before delivering mighty judgments. But, as John Bangsund might have said, is life long enough to read the collected works of Orson Scott Card?

I couldn't agree with your review of Moorcock's The War Hound and the World's Pain. I found it extremely moving. Generally I have a hard time with Moorcock; I can't stand the Jerry Cornelius stuff. And I am bogged down trying to read Myther London. I did like The Golden Barge, which he has said was written in deliberate imitation of Mervyn Peake.

(21 May 1989)

CY CHAUVIN

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You didn't really get to the heart of why you didn't enjoy Little, Big. The fact that the lives of the characters in the novel are all part of a greater tale and pre-determined by a greater power (perhaps) can hardly spoil the story for the reader, since the reader does not know the outcome! (And having read the novel three times, I'd have to say that it only increased my enjoyment of the book.) If you object to it on a philosophical basis, you should be reminded that the free-will-versus-determinism argument can never be solved. (And certainly no novel has ever embraced determinism in a more positive manner, if that's what it's really about.) But I can't believe that's why you really failed to enjoy Little, Big.

Actually, a fair number of other fans were disappointed by Little, Big, and I imagine they expected a novel with a more lively plot, or a conventional fantasy. I found it difficult on the first reading for the first 70 pages; by then what I had first thought was awkward or silly (such as the 'grandfather trout') became wonderful. I think Crowley's blend of true fantasy and metafiction works very well, and I found the book intense and poignant.

(25 May 1989)

When reading Little, Big, I had the feeling that Crowley was smirking at me, like somebody who keeps asking you to wait for the punchline of a particularly good joke, but never reveals it. And the smirk is part of an overall complacency that I found repellent. In any real arguments about free will versus determinism (such as Kobo Abe's Inter Ice Age Four), the position of humanity, stuck between certain death and perpetual futile attempts to defeat death, is seen as tragic. But all of Crowley's characters, except one, are immortal, so their actions have no human importance -- except that they regard the poor doomed human race as the enemy. Under all their cuteness, this lot are vile, or else Crowley has failed to reveal something vital to me.



BUCK COULSON

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Some Will Not Die is actually a 1950s book; the title was False Night, and the publisher was Lion Library. (which probably makes it a Collector's Item today.) It was expanded some for Donning, but the essential story remains the same. It's not really right-wing politics, either; it's the story of how an intelligent, well-intentioned individual can be driven by circumstances into becoming a dictator, losing his ideals for the sake of 'practicality', and that can happen to either the right or left. And perhaps has; I wouldn't give either Hitler or Stalin any noble motives, but Castro and Marcos, maybe. Eventually, in every case except possibly that of Kemal Ataturk, the urge to remain in power submerges everything else. Even Franco hung on as long as he could, though he surprised everyone by turning the country back to constitutional government at this death.

We have a vivid illustration of expediency-to-keep-power in Australia at the moment. Hawke, a supposedly Labor (social democratic) prime minister, has taken over more and more of the conservatives' policies in order to leave them without a platform, and therefore keep himself in power. The result is another Western-style 'dictatorship': whichever main party you vote for, you're voting for the same despicable policies. And those people who should be forming the new Opposition -- a RLP (Real Labor Party) -- fail to do so because they would lose personal power if they cut themselves free from the traditional parties.

I'll let someone with more knowledge of Greek history give you the details of Soldier of the Mist. Some I knew, some I could easily look up, some would take a lot of time to look up and I didn't take the time. Apparently I knew enough for the book to be fairly enjoyable to me -- but then I like R. A. Lafferty, too, and I never know what he's writing about. Sandra Kiesel has explained some of Lafferty's references to me, but knowing them doesn't particularly increase my enjoyment of his books.

(29 May 1989)

COLIN STEELE

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Thanks for the Twentieth Anniversary SF Commentary. In the accompanying issue of Dreams and False Alarms you mention 'success in writing seems linked to Who You Know'. I can only concur, in the context of sf's (in the widest sense) profile in our national outlets.

Australia is rapidly reaching the situation, as in Britain, where sf is 'ghettoized' to one-liners, or doesn't appear at all in leading newspapers and weeklies. Unlike Britain, moreover, we don't have an effective sf infrastructure, as provided by Foundation, Interzone and Vector, among others. SF has virtually disappeared from The Australian since John Baxter went to America and, perhaps more importantly, since Sandra Hall left as Literary Editor. Geoffrey Dutton, according to Baxter, 'didn't want to know about sf', even though Dutton pushed crime novels (academic respectability a la Stephen Knight?), while Larry Oakley has finally 'found' Terry Dowling, but his sf reviews seem few and far between.

Danien Broderick manages to make The Age from time to time, but he, I gather, has trouble getting material from publishers, while Van Ikin's offerings in the Sydney Morning Herald 'seem to get lost somewhere across the Nullarbor, as they are often dated when they appear. My own sf pieces in The Canberra Times have suffered in frequency as a result of the general reduction in the book pages, although Alan Davison and his colleagues at Century Hutchinson do ensure that Gollancz publications are regularly supplied, in contrast to the situation a year or two ago.

The Bulletin has savagely reduced its book pages, and sf never gets a look in unless someone like Margaret Atwood writes a futuristic novel. The saga

of George Turner's The Sea and Summer is a case in point: George had to win 'fame' overseas to get picked up here in any meaningful sense. The Book Magazine, with its sf column, has not appeared for over a year at the time of writing. I can't believe salvation can be found in The Adelaide Advertiser or The Brisbane Courier-Mail.

We need sf enthusiasts out amongst the publicists, review editors, etc. My reviewing for The Times on Sunday largely came about through meeting Jan McGuinness at the Victorian Premier's Literary Award dinners, but that's another outlet that has disappeared.

The 'infrastructure' journals struggle. It seems that The Notional has disappeared, like The Cygnus Chronicler before it. Only Australian SF Review regularly carries the flag, but its 'public' distribution must be terribly limited. Therefore welcome back!

(6 June 1989)

I haven't been away, Colin. The only real difference between SFC and TMR is that you could read a magazine called The Metaphysical Review in the Philosophy staff room without being jeered at. which is all part of the point you are making: science fiction is still thoroughly disliked and ignored in Australia. Worse, people don't want to be associated with any activity that other people distrust. Australians don't want to be jeered at; they also don't want to be associated with people who might be jeered at. So science fiction has actually received a surprisingly good coverage over the years, especially at The Age (until Rod Usher's takeover of the literary pages). At least literary editors feel they should make some gesture of support for the field. The trouble is that they don't understand it themselves. Stuart Sayers at The Age helped Australian sf in general, and me and Norstrilia Press in particular, but he knew absolutely nothing about sf. Barry Oakley (The Australian) has derided sf in my hearing, but he hasn't read it. Therefore it's a miracle he replaced John Baxter with Terry Dowling. I expected him to drop sf reviewing altogether. Good news is that Peter Nicholls is now the SF Reviewer for The Sunday Herald, one of Melbourne's three new newspapers.

But there is no way that the 'infrastructure' magazines, as you put them, can get public distribution or make money. There must be lots of people out there who would relish magazines like ASFR, SFC, TMR, The Mentor and Science Fiction. But they will never know about us.

Nevertheless, Things Must Be Looking Up if Damien Broderick is allowed to attempt a science-fictionally based PhD thesis at an Australian tertiary institution:

DAMIEN BRODERICK

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Gratifying indeed to see the Twentieth Anniversary Issue of SFC, though I'm a little saddened that you didn't commission pieces from the original contributors. Perhaps you might keep that in mind for the quarter-century number, a frightening enough prospect.

To tell the truth, it didn't occur to me to commission articles from the original contributors, although all except Robert Toomey are still active in the field. The material for No. 67 came together neatly, so that's how it hit the page.

Taking a cue from your declaration that you won't accept theses in your revived journal, I refrain from burdening you with any lumps of mine, so that in this particular, too, you will stand out from other fanzine editors, most of whom these days seem to bulk out their ample editions in this fashion. Of course the prohibition also spares you any alternative contribution, because I have grown to hate my word processor even more than when it was used just for fiction and Age skiffy reviews. I near the end of



my first three years on this project (plus six months' preliminary hurdles, and I've accreted something like 160,000 words of Deep Thoughts with a good many more yet to be Thought, or at least Written; since I'm belatedly told there's a length restriction of around 100 K, this means ceaseless pruning, a soul-destroying activity when the growths have been so hard won. Happily, I have had my research grant extended for an additional six months, so the bloody swine of a thing will be both longer and shorter before it's done. At the moment I read Michel Serres, who does things with information theory that only a frog would countenance.

Entropy is not a word that comes to mind when one thinks of Brian Aldiss, naturally. I wish you'd given a more meaty version of your brisk review of Forgotten Life, which I've just read with some pleasure and some dubeyty. Did you notice, apropos of, that Joseph Winter has attributed to his pen that great filthy, uh, manual for soldiers, Michael Meatyard (sic), borrowed from A Soldier Erect, where it is described as possessing a 'liberating quota of misprints and schoolboy's howler English' (p. 134, Corgi pb)? 'Who wrote the immortal Michael Meatyard?' asked Sgt. Stubbs. Now we know -- by a postmodern impulse of pastiche, a youthful scriptor of simulacra avant la lettre. Or perhaps, as Yvonne Rousseau might say, it was another nine gentlemen.

As always, I am impressed by the way Elaine reviews with logic, intelligence, and clarity, and comes to the wrong conclusions (for instance, about Morrow's book, where she unerringly found its weaknesses and scamped its far greater strengths, unlike your own review a few pages on; 'scorching fire' indeed, and terrible laughter). Those reviews you write yourself are always a delight; perhaps it's your humility, as well as your erudition.

Perhaps, though, you should have been even more humble in your praise of Lincoln's Dreams, which struck me as almost wholly a meretricious exercise in cold-blooded tripe and manipulation, especially the central mechanism which (on no other ground than the need in a skiffy yarn to have a central mechanism) compared access to the dreams of the troubled dead with remote-controlled telephone-answering machines, a notion that unfolded through this methodical exercise with a bathos exceeded only by its thudding equation of the narrator with Lee's horse Traveler. Spare me, O Lord, from the products of writing courses and buddy-group workshops.

(13 June 1989)

Elaine says that her logic, intelligence, and clarity unerringly lead her to the right conclusions. This is the way the world ends offended her in much the same way that Lincoln's Dreams appears to have offended you. Speaking of which: I'm not sure that we read the same book. The central 'mechanism', as you put it, seems merely that: a way of heightening tension. But the book's power comes from the great American myth that unfolds through the girl's dreams: the story of Robert E. Lee and his doomed campaign. At one point the main characters find themselves in a part of America from which they cannot escape without travelling a road that crosses a battlefield of the American Civil War. Lincoln's Dreams is a reminder of the powerful cultural myths developed by Americans, myths of greater potency than any found in Australia. Willis brilliantly recreates one such myth through a series of ever more appalling dream images.

JACK HERMAN

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I was interested to see the review of Creator, having seen the movie (after all, it had Peter O'Toole in it), but not read the book. In the movie, the problem of Boris and Barbara was solved by making them a sub-plot, not figments of Harry Wolper's imagination. The sub-plot derogated to some extent from the main plot, Wolper's concern with the cloning of Lucy, his fights with Kuhlbeck and his developing relationship with Melie. The best thing about the movie was O'Toole's Harry Wolper, the sanest madman I've seen in recent cinema.

(20 June 1989)

SUZY MCKEE CHARNAS

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Dear Virginia Kidd

Thanks so much for the copy of Bruce Gillespie's review of both Dorothea Dreams and The Vampire Tapestry. Actually, this is one of the best reviews I've seen of Dorothea -- the kind of review that makes an author sit up and take notice, saying to herself, 'Oh, was I really doing that? Well, I guess I was.' If you're in touch with Mr Gillespie, you could pass that on to him. (I'd drop him a note myself, but don't have an address for SF Commentary, a publication I wasn't aware existed.) (3 July 1989)

I've written to Suzy McKee Charnas, enclosing a few magazines to show her what I've been doing the last 20 years or so.

Thanks, Virginia, for sending on a copy of SFC 67. I do my best to get in touch with authors of books I've reviewed, but often don't have addresses for them. I've bought Suzy McKee Charnas's recent trilogy of novels for children. I'll read them soon.

HAL HALL

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Thanks for the letter and continued sending of your zines. You already knew my correspondence habits range from non-existent to 'Why did he bother?' Lately (the last two years), I have been somewhere in the general area of gaffiation, apathy, overwork and indexing. The creation of the monster Science Fiction and Fantasy Reference Index for Gale Research threw me so far behind that I am just now typing the 1986 book review index!

Yup, I'll try to go back and index the review in The Metaphysical Review and the new SFC. I am trying to pick up all the reviews from 1986 to 1989, and start the negotiations for a new five-year cumulation of both book reviews and secondary articles.

As you can see from the above, Hal is the editor of two mighty projects, the Science Fiction and Fantasy Book Review Index (annually) and the Science Fiction and Fantasy Research Index. Any magazine running reviews of books in the field should go to Hal. Not only do I find it useful to have SFC book reviews indexed by someone else, but I find that regular appearances in the Index is an effective way of selling subsci.

I haven't had time to read all the new SFC, but it made me reflect on how much I enjoyed seeing the issues in the 1970s especially -- they were a flash of light and insight in a time of little good information. I miss the controversy of varied points of view and the opportunity to see some of the best fan writers at work. I guess it is still out there, but I don't see it as often, and in such compact and convenient form.

I could say that in the 1980s TWR has been carrying out the job that SFC was doing in the 1970s, but that's not quite true. I became very disgusted with most sf for a time, stopped keeping up with the short fiction, and missed most of the novels. But also I found almost no magazines with which I could hold a conversation. SF Studies and Foundation are good to have in the house, but I don't feel any impulse to write for or to them. John Bangsund abandoned magazines about sf; Dick Geis has withdrawn from the scene; Jeff Smith, my favourite American fanzine editor, has disappeared; Vector won't trade, and I keep forgetting to renew my BSFA membership. Niekas and Lan's Lantern have bright spots, but give no sense of 'covering the field' as Geis and a few others did in the 1960s and 1970s. Now there is only The New York Review of Science Fiction (which is reluctant to trade, and I'm too broke to subscribe), the excellent review pages of Interzone, and fellow Australians: Science Fiction, Australian Science Fiction Review, The Mentor, and the sf comments in Gegensohn and Weber Woman's Revenge. Merv Blans has been forced to cut back his productions.

One more item, worth investigating: a magazine I've just seen (two issues so far), Peake Studies, from G. Peter Winnington, Les 3 Chasseurs, 1413 Orzens, Vaud, Switzerland. Even if you don't know or like Peake's work, you might enjoy this magazine. Readably literary.

I think I am a frustrated Australian. We have been treated here with quite a few flicks set in or from Australia. I have enjoyed them -- as much for the speech and the setting as anything, but it rekindled my desire to see the country at first hand. I've seen both The Man from Snowy River shows, Macauley's Daughter, Outback Bound, The Fringe Dwellers, and the TV series Dolphin Cove. I particularly enjoyed Macauley's Daughter and The Fringe Dwellers, but I'll watch the horse scenes in the Snowy River shows any day of the week. I'd be curious about your impressions of those shows.

Someday I will get the time to read some... what was that stuff I used to read? -- you know, space and robots and the moon and Jupiter? -- oh yeah! Science Fiction. It is criminal how little I have read and enjoyed in the past few years. Card's novels are still fresh in my mind, and Zebrowski's Synergy collections have had some good stuff.

(3 July 1989)

I haven't seen any of the films on your list, Hal. Worse, I haven't heard of two of them: Macauley's Daughter and Outback Bound. Maybe they were made during the recent boom in film-making fuelled by over-generous tax concessions. Many of the films made then were never shown on cinema screens; the producers just pocketed their tax concessions. Some of the lost films are turning up on local TV during the depths of the night or non-ratings periods; it seems that others were distributed in America without anybody here knowing they existed. The local critics were nasty about The Man from Snowy River, but it has made more money in this country than any other film, local or overseas, except Crocodile Dundee. The Fringe Dwellers got a sniffy response. Bruce Beresford works overseas so often the critics don't welcome him when he returns home.

ANDY SAWYER

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I read Diane Fox's review of A Door Into Ocean with great interest, as my daughter liberated a review copy from Avon Books some time ago, attracted by the cover, I suppose, and read it before I did. As she was eleven at the time, and not noticeably attracted to sf, this was a significant occurrence, even more so because she thought it was really good. (Despite the odd nightmare caused by a description of one of the sea-creatures, she read it again at least twice.)

Then the Women's Press copy arrived, and I asked someone to review it for Paperback Inferno. He declined on the grounds that he felt he couldn't handle lesbian propaganda. At this point I thought I'd better try it out myself. It is very good indeed (I'd welcome other glimpses into the same universe), and I have to admit that Rosamund has remained (so far as I know) sexually unaffected, although is now very feminist, and a good thing too (most of the time; it's sometimes very wearing trying to get a feminist thirteen-year-old to clean her room).

(31 July 1989)

BRIAN ALDISS

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I was grateful for your favourable response to Forgotten Life, and want to thank you for your review in The Age.

Of course you found it interesting to detect the autobiography in the fiction of Forgotten Life, but that this is an untrustworthy game at best, and cannot be greatly appealing to general readers of the review. It is true, in a way, that I have rather diagrammatically divided myself between

the three characters, Sheila, Clement and Joseph. But that's only to state a truism; even such diverse writers as Dickens have only themselves (at base) to draw on. Well, no, perhaps that's taking the argument too far. Dickens is an exception to many rules. But there is also an autonomous component in the human psyche -- well, like the anima -- and this is what takes over, I believe, when a novelist really nits a resonant theme, as I did here. The biographer of Zola, chap called Hemmings, says of Zola that when he was writing he passed into a totally different state of being, where private terrors and delights took possession of him. Without being daft enough to compare myself with Zola, I certainly know that feeling of possession -- and that's why, in the light of day, I mistrust quests for the autobiographical element; the voices and actions of my three main characters came in the main from something beyond me.

The novel itself, as well as just some of the contents, is part of my life. The way in which the Helliconia novels -- yes, I understand your impatience with them, but they have their merits -- were part of life was that they helped me out my long debate with religion, and the religious upbringing that gnawed at me since I was a child. Like many people, I seem to need some form of belief. Gaia does that for me. The God I was brought up on departed from then onwards: an anti-eroticism Congregationalist God, who then made way for the rise of deeply embedded archetypes like the anima of Forgotten Life.

It's patnetic to write this all out, really, in a plodding linear way. It makes better sense in the august guise of fiction!

(8 September 1989)

After the Age review of Forgotten Life appeared, Damien Broderick took me to task for half an hour, berating the inadequacies of the review, especially its emphasis on the autobiographical elements in the novel. I agreed with him, but pointed out that The Age gives a reviewer 750 words per book. The only reason for using me rather than some other reviewer is that I knew some generally unavailable information about the author. I tried to pass on to the reader a few bits and pieces that might make Forgotten Life more comprehensible and enjoyable. There simply wasn't room to include all the other things I wanted to say.

In ASFR (Second Series) No. 19, John Foyster reviewed Forgotten Life, saying many of the things I would like to have said in my Age review. So I'm saved the trouble of producing an expanded version of my own thoughts. I could say, however, that Forgotten Life includes all the elements of the Aldiss style that I like best.

For reasons I would still find hard to pin down, I gained the impression that in the Helliconia books Brian seem to suppress some elements of his style in order to emphasize some unfamiliar aspects of his craft. The result is a trilogy that sits uncomfortably with the 'Aldiss fan', such as myself. But the Helliconia books have proved accessible to a wide range of readers who had not read Aldiss before. I hope they are discovering the rest of Aldiss -- Hotnouse, Cryptozoic, Non-Stop, Greybeard, Barefoot, etc. Meanwhile, I enjoyed the second Helliconia book much more than the first, and still have one to go. Also recently received are the two volumes of Aldiss's best short stories. And probably there will be a new Aldiss novel when I least expect it.

WE ALSO HEARD FROM quite a few other people. Treat this letter column as Part 1 of a piece that will be completed next issue. A few people said they preferred T.R to SFC; thanks for making it clear which magazine you wanted. Some people have subscribed specifically to SFC... and others have not indicated that they received it. Hence the print run will stay low.

It looks as if the next issue is nearly full. New contributors include Alan Stewart and Andy Sawyer. I'm back (yawn). Some other people have asked for reviewing assignments. There's a whole Colin Steele column on file for next time. Au revoir.  
(Last stencil typed 9 February 1990.)

DAVE LANGFORD is the fan writer who drives other writers, fan and pro, mad with jealousy. Critic (see below), commentator on fan affairs and affrays (Ansible magazine), writer of fiction, fact articles and, as a money-making sideline, writer of computer programs, Dave Langford now adds to an illustrious career by contributing to SF Commentary. He received another Hugo for Best Fan Writer in 1989.

The following columns were published first in a magazine called GM (Games Magazine, see?) for reasons explained below. My original idea was to run the lot -- every word of every column published so far. Good sense prevailed, so here is about 80 per cent of the material Dave sent me.

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#### CRITICAL HITS

by Dave Langford

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Columns for GM Magazine (UK), copyright (c) David Langford, 1988, 1989.

THE STORY SO FAR: Some games fans may remember the hated name Langford from six years of book review columns in a magazine called something like Albino of Restricted Growth. ((Note for non-UK readers: White Dwarf..)) That all ended amicably when, alerted by failing eyesight and hairy palms, I decided to stop abusing my health through over-indulgence in fantasy trilogies. My happy retirement had barely reached its third bottle when GM tempted me with promises of a looser format, voluptuously non-sexist groupies, and lots of independent systemless role-playing fantasy money. NOW READ ON...

#### YOUNG SELDON

An awful lot of story-so-far is needed for Isaac Asimov's new Prelude to Foundation (Grafton, 461 pp., £11.95), although it slots into his Interminable History of the Future before the other books with 'Foundation' in the title. As known to every SF reader whose fictional researches go beyond the Sunday Sport, the technocratic Foundation is set up as antidote to the fall of a Galactic Empire suspiciously like the Roman one -- this fall having been predicted by ace guru and 'psychohistorian' Hari Seldon. Typically for Asimov, the books have vaguely intellectual quest/detective plots, with big questions and big trite answers. Q: Can the historical inevitability of Seldon's Plan save the Foundation from this threat, and that, and three more? A: Yes, yes, and three times yes. Q: What can save the Plan from the mutant superman who defies psychohistorical prediction? A: Aha, there is this hidden Second Foundation... Q: Hidden where? A: Here, no, there, no, there, no, there, no, no, I was kidding, it's really there!

That summarizes the original 1940s stories, dated but fun. In the 1980s Asimov's sequels got out of hand, increasingly bloated and vacuous, each ending with a feeblar revelation than the last. Meanwhile the series expanded backwards with the incorporation of the earlier 'robot' books and some depressing stuff about every plot-string being ultimately pulled by offstage robots. This accounts for gloomy critical speculation that Hari Seldon, onlie begetter of the Foundations, would turn out to be another bloody robot....

Prelude is all about the young Seldon. It's risky to over-expose your white-haired guru in this fashion: Tolkien never showed us the early apprenticeship and sex life of Gandalf, but Asimov has no such qualms. Pursued through strangely stereotyped regions of planet Trantor, Seldon emerges as a bit of a wimp: not too bad at unarmed combat (mathematical expertise is hard to convey, so I suppose this was the next best thing), easily manipulated by everyone else

in the plot, but -- thank goodness -- not a robot. No robot would be so daft as to risk its neck violating sacred taboos in the vague hope of maybe picking up some possibly nonexistent information which might bear on an idea not yet properly formulated. Prelude's big question isn't, 'Will Seldon invent psychohistory? (we know he must) but, 'When will he get his great creative insight?' Here there's genuine suspense; it could be on any page from about 400 to the last (461), and only my disappointment with the inspiration's remarkable unexcitingness could persuade me to give away this, the book's major secret. Answer: page 440.

It's slightly more fun to play Spot the Hidden Robot amongst the smallish cast list. To equal my 100 per cent score, you must remember the Robots and Empire rewrite of the Laws of Robotics, whereby robots can now hurt and disobey people all they like provided it's for a good enough cause. After the astonishing, mindboggling revelations, Prelude fades into the sunset with an ending to satisfy all you connoisseurs of Mills and Boon. I wonder how awesome the mentor-figure of Lord of the Rings would have seemed after a prequel with the final line, 'Kiss me again, Galdalf. -- Please.'

#### PRINGLE'S NEXT 100

Turning hastily from SF, here's David Pringle's Modern Fantasy: The 100 Best Novels (Grafton, 278 pp., £14.95), sequel to Science Fiction: The 100 Best Novels (Xanadu, 1985, 224 pp., £3.95). The best fantasy games aren't necessarily based on the best fantasy, but everyone loves a booklist. When not nodding happily at the discovery that a personal favourite is featured in this sensibly chosen Hall of Fame, you're enjoying exhilarating shrieks of rage at some unspeakably boneheaded inclusion or omission. Pringle does us proud on the first count, and generously allows much scope for the second. Here, compiled from his enjoyable book, are some lists of my own.

Influential Authors Omitted Because Pre-1946 include Ernest Bramah, James Branch Cabell, Lord Dunsany, E. R. Eddison, William Morris, etc. Cabell and Dunsany were still publishing lesser work in the 1950s; but Robert E. Howard of Conan fame gets in on a publication-dates fiddle despite dying in 1936.

Nifty Fantasies Which You Didn't Read Because They Looked 'Mainstream' include books by Peter Ackroyd, Kingsley Amis, William Burroughs, John Fowles, Michael Frayn, Alasdair Gray, Doris Lessing, Brian Moore, Flan O'Brien, Christopher Priest, Thomas Pynchon and Iain Banks.

Most Over-Represented Author. Fritz Leiber deserves two of his four entries, for the horrific Conjure Wife and the exotic/humorous Swords of Lankmar; but his The Sinful Ones loses a fine idea in a mere potboiler and (I'm going to be unpopular for this) the urban-nightmare qualities of Our Lady of Darkness fade into triviality by comparison with Ackroyd's Hawksmoor (also here).

Most Blatant Double Standards. Mervyn Peake's Titus trilogy gets a separate entry for each volume. Tolkien's trilogy is disposed of in a single entry (and ditto multi-book efforts by Blish, Donaldson and Kay). Is this justice? Yes, to the extent that the Peake trio is discontinuous; but no, because I don't think Book 3 (Titus Alone) rates inclusion as a separate item.

Most Stupefying Editorial Courage is shown in the 'humorous fantasy' subgenre, when, after admitting pleasant efforts by Foul Anderson, Gordon Dickson and the de Camp/Fratt team, Pringle not only excludes Terry Pratchett but relegates him to an omission list featuring such awful failed humorists as Piers Anthony, Robert Asprin and Jack Chalker.

Best Unexpected Genre Inclusions. Avram Davidson's The Phoenix and the Mirror, R. A. Lafferty's Fourth Mansions, Rudy Rucker's White Light, Michael Shea's Niff the Lean, Gene Wolfe's Peace.

Deplorable Omissions-By-Fiat. Our editor quailed at the extra slog of



researching translated or 'children's' fantasy. In the first category we lose Italo Calvino (and I'd have been tempted to smuggle in Jorge Luis Borges for all that he never wrote a novel); in the second, such triff writers as Diana Wynne Jones and William Wayne (though juveniles by Alan Garner, Ursula Le Guin and C. S. Lewis somehow creep in).

Forgivable Omissions. Introducing this work, Brian Aldiss whinges about the exclusion of William Golding's prehistoric fantasia The Inheritors. Many fans will likewise boggle at not finding Gene Wolfe's 'Book of the New Sun'. Same reason each time: our hero editor judged both to be on the SF side of the border, and put them in his Science Fiction: The 100 Best Novels.

Most Grudging Entry. See Pringle's editorial comments on the lumbering, knurled, ravaged-nostrilled, spleen-bedecked, leprous, argute and refulgent lucubrations of Stephen R. Donaldson. Very naughty of him. Tee-hee.

That's enough lists. Indeed, that's enough Langford for now. One last recommendation: don't miss Russell Miller's scarifying but hysterical Bare-Faced Messiah: The True Story of L. Ron Hubbard, out in paperback at last despite Scientological litigation (Sphere, 521 pp., £3.95).

#### ELUSIVE CARROLL... AND OTHERS

Jonathan Carroll is an author who deserves your attention despite, or because of, being weirdly difficult to classify. You could call his books psychological-fantasy-mystery-horror stories, with an elusive magic in the writing and vivid characters reminiscent of those larger-than-life creations of the late Theodore Sturgeon. Carroll's first, The Land of Laughs, baffled publishers and suffered from desperately misleading cover designs: the American paperback resembled a twee, Oz-style children's book, the British one looked like routinely grotty horror. More sensibly, his present publishers have opted for colourfully surreal jackets on Bones of the Moon — one of my 1987 Best Books — and the latest, Sleeping in Flame (Legend, 244 pp., £10.95, or £5.95 paperback).

This time, Carroll's favourite elements emerge quickly enough: a setting in Vienna (where he lives), a relish for life, places and food, a moving second-time-around love affair... and something nasty in the woodshed. The blackness from the hero's past has such weird ramifications that few writers could have made it work: our man's life seems prefigured by past incarnations going back to a bit-part from the Brothers Grimm, his diminutive father may or may not be a famous character with a very silly name, and the conclusion is an outrageous psychological rabbit punch. I'll read this one again.

One I've read before; Rudolph Eric Raspe's Baron Munchausen (Dedalus Classics, 268 pp., £4.95), that legendarily daft collection of tall tales from 1785. The Baron's journeys around and through the world (by eagle and volcano) and to the Moon (by beanstalk and whirlwind) make this a must for fans of Piers Anthony and other unconvincing sf.

I can't do justice to story collections: a decent short needs as much comment as a novel, and space forbids. Terry's Universe, ed. Beth Meacham (Gollancz, 245 pp., £11.95) is a memorial to one of SF's best-loved editors, Terry Carr, who died in 1987. Twelve writers contribute stories (Fritz Leiber's is a tantalizing extract from a coming Pafhrd/Kouser novel) and Harlan Ellison, unable as so often to get his fictional act together, says emotive words instead. The Orbit Science Fiction Yearbook, ed. David Garnett (Orbit, 336 pp., £4.99) is cheering to see, not merely for its fine stories and trenchant critical comment, but because at last we have a supposedly regular British anthology of each year's best short SF. (It's over a decade since the Aldiss/Harrison Year's Best ceased publication.) Garnett fails to include my own 1987 story, but does a good job despite this one awful lapse.

## THE INESCAPABLE PRATCHETT

Of all the writers I actually know, Terry Pratchett has displayed the highest profile of 1988. It began with the year's first SF convention, Microcon in Exeter, where friendly student hosts struggled in vain against the university venue's malign anti-barmen, who stalked the halls searching for drinks and taking them away from people. It was Terry who saved the attending writers with his emergency convention kit, a briefcase of lemons, tonic water and gin....

Wherever two or three SFfans are gathered together, TP miraculously appears, often in tasteless leather trousers. Examples of spontaneous Pratchett were reported at every British convention of note and also the 1988 Worldcon in New Orleans, whence I heard unsavoury tales of addiction to bucket-sized banana Daiquiris.

His energy remains appalling. The sixth Discworld book is out; the seventh (Pyramids) follows in May; the eighth (Feust) is finished, and the ninth (Guards! Guards!) nearly so, while our author wanders convention bars trying out jokes intended for the tenth, and in between has also written a children's book, Blimey.

For now, we have Wyrd Sisters (Gollancz, 251 pp., £10.95), another exceedingly funny concoction which shows the Pratchett ability to pinch stock materials and reassemble them with warped Discworld logic. Tom Stoppard converted Hamlet to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead with star parts given to attendant lords; Wyrd Sisters re-examines Macbeth from the viewpoint of three witches, including redoubtable Granny Weatherwax.

Hamlet creeps in too, and a million other productions like the seminal Duck Soup and Waiting for Godot, plus Shakespearean properties: strolling players, a storm waiting for its big theatrical break, substituted identities and a scene-stealing Fool. The author's 'wide but superficial' (his words) erudition is more visible than usual in this riot.

I think I fell off my chair most painfully at the Ideologically Sound Cauldron Scene, influenced by a progressive young witch. 'Whole grain wheat and lentils too, In the cauldron seethe and stew....'

After the World Fantasy Convention in London (where Stephen Donaldson filled me with heart-stopping terror by saying, 'I read your review of me'), Wyrd Sisters was launched at a Hallowe'en party, together with Robert Holdstock's Lavondyss (Gollancz, 367 pp., £11.95) -- a sequel to the much-praised Mythago Wood.

Lavondyss is a book which demands rereading, and for that matter a rereading of Mythago Wood too. In both, Holdstock shows an amazing ability to plug into the raw stuff of myths -- shaving away endless layers of storytelling embellishment to reach something brutal and numinous that lies at the core.

The dense, shadowed, creepy heart of Ryhope Wood opens inward into larger realms, primary places where 'mythagos' emerge from shared racial dreams. Anyone penetrating these 'geistzones' is liable to be absorbed into the beginnings of myth: not replaying old stories but becoming their origin. It's a subtle, disturbing, powerful idea, and much more complex than my too-brief summary.

Lavondyss charts the progress of Tallis, a girl shaman moving slowly from 1950s England to the inner realms in search of her lost brother. Much of it is amazingly good, like her growing awareness of elusive power and a magical apparatus of masks and totems which 'work' via fine shades and perceptions -- nothing reducible to any crude table of spell effects or power points. And the final vision has a shocking, unexpected force.

But unlike Mythago Wood, Lavondyss seems to begin too far from the realms of common sense. It's hard to believe that this thirteen-year-old seer wouldn't be taken rather frequently to the doctor for persistently weird speech, behaviour

and 'hallucinations'. There's also some confusing play with flashbacks, repetition and changing point of view, all getting in the way of that compelling journey to the heart of myth.

Minor flaws, I'd say. Lavondyss is a book of great power. Read it.

Had you attended the World Fantasy Convention you could have simultaneously met Messrs. Pratchett and Holdstock, fallen over the slumped bodies of myself and GM's Wayne, and sat at the feet of Diana Wynne Jones -- another author whose popularity keeps growing. Her latest is The Lives of Christopher Chant (Methuen, 252 pp., £8.95), extending the very loosely connected series about the alternate-world civil servant in charge of Magic and Social Security: Chrestomanci.

After saying the usual things about never-failing inventiveness and sense of fun, I must add that this story of the enchanter's youth is singularly bloodthirsty. The villain goes in for butchery on a scale unprecedented in 'juvenile' fantasy, while wince-making viewpoint accounts of impalements, burnings, broken necks and smashed skulls are made doubly so by a magical need for the unlucky victim to suffer each calamity twice.

Also here: a decidedly offbeat approach to astral travel, a Living Goddess with (sometimes) four arms and (always) a passion for Angela Brazel, much smuggling and double-dealing in several different worlds, a levitating roof, and an unspeakably hellish cat called Throgmorton. Nifty entertainment.

Next came the annual Novacon in Birmingham, featuring most of the above plus guest of honour Garry Kilworth, whose latest is Abandonati (Unwin Hyman, 162 pp., £12.95). Instead of the exotic, colourful locations we expect from him, this delves into the muckiest depths of street life.

Abandonati are street people, sleepers in doorways and scavengers of litter bins. With dollops of grim humour the book describes a world from which the rich (i.e. anyone who can afford GM, shoes, food) have inexplicably vanished. One unstated but obvious message is that, viewed from gutter level, we 'rich' have in all the most important ways already disappeared.

Life goes on, just barely, for the brain-wrecked wino hero. The best-fed people are cannibals; the most happy and affluent are former gypsies; a handleless mug and a greasy pack of cards are potent tokens of exchange. It's a moving little book.

Now here's a fact of mindboggling improbability to those who know the publishing business. All four of the above books have good covers which the authors like! In a world where art departments work long and hard to devise ugly, inappropriate, identikit jackets, this is cheering. Loud huzzas for the artists, respectively Josh Kirby, Alan Lee, Cathy Simpson and Dave McKean.

Speaking of artists, Britain's gallant small-press publishers always try hard in this area. John Brunner's The Days of March (Kerosina, 309 pp., £14.95) is a warts-and-all novel about the early days of CND, worthy but distinctly short on plot, and competently illustrated by Richard Middleton. James Blaylock's Homunouius (Morrigan, 244 pp., £11.95) is bizarre Victorian fantasy, alternately mystical and hilarious, with eccentric 'period' illustrations from someone called Ferret who can't tell a cocked hat from a top hat. I'm glad to have this collector's edition of a good book; cheapskates and abandonati can skulk off looking for the paperback (Grafton, 301 pp., £3.50).

With all the conventions of 1983 safely behind me, I enjoyed a few pints of relaxation at the British SF Association's London pub meeting and was surprised to find it (almost) the year's first SF event which didn't feature Terry Pratchett. But later, on a platform of the Central Line, I heard a balding, bearded voice say 'Hello Dave' behind me, and turned to find there was indeed no escape....

## GUTS!

Publishing is strange, full of eccentricities from bygone days. SF author Richard Cowper used to claim that his first book contract contained the clause, 'In ye event of tardie deliv'rie, ye Scribe shall be flogg'd.' A true example of the industry's endearing daftness concerns my last novel, Guts!

This was a spoof horror epic written in revolting collaboration with my pal John Grant. Real horror authors did us proud with quotations meant for a suitably bloodstained cover. 'I have seen the bowels of horror fiction, and their names are David Langford and John Grant!' retched Graham Masterton. 'Makes Night of the Claws look like Beatrix Potter!' gibbered Guy N. Smith. 'The first horror novel I don't even dare to read!' quavered Ramsey Campbell.

Alas, although Guts! was commissioned in advance, completed in 1987, enthusiastically accepted and paid for, it proved to be the horror novel they don't even dare to publish. For eighteen months there was silence. As I write, the last weeks of the contracted publication period are trickling by. All bets are then off; we'll have to market the ruddy thing all over again, to some less timorous outfit.

What went wrong? Too complex to explain: a tangle of internal politics at the publishing house, making it hard to blame our hero editor. My frenzied public must wait another year for Guts! Meanwhile the horror boom continues unabated, although in posh circles it's polite to call it 'dark fantasy' and to make no tactless reference to chainsaw massacres, zombie gang-bangs or (as in Guts!) exploding entrails.

If like me you prefer your fear at short-story length, Robinson Publishing offer a solid selection of wintry chillers: The Mammoth Book of Short Horror Novels, ed. Mike Ashley (518 pp., £4.95), Christmas Ghosts, ed. Kathryn Cramer and David Hartwell (282 pp., £5.95), The Best Horror from Fantasy Tales, ed. Stephen Jones and David Sutton (264 pp., £11.95), and, best of all, Robert Aickman's collection Cold Hand in Mine (252 pp., £3.50). Every Aickman story is a reminder that a good writer doesn't need gory stage props to create that lingering aura of chilly unease.

So... is Brian Stableford's vampire novel The Empire of Fear (Simon & Schuster, 390 pp., £11.95) another identikit horror epic? No. Despite a smoke screen of ritual and 'sabbats', the immortal vampire aristocracy of this alternate-world 1623 has been created by biological rather than supernatural change. Traditional Victorian vampirism was a heavily sexy metaphor for what couldn't be written about, i.e. sex; rationalist Stableford has a slightly different unthinkable in mind.

In the first section, which is incidentally the culmination of a tortured love story, one of this world's few scientific thinkers conducts a suicidal experiment in anti-vampire biowarfare. His talisman isn't the cross but the newly invented microscope.

This torch of reason is passed to his son Noell, who makes a gruelling heart-of-darkness journey to the African wellsprings of the vampire plague. Here heroism doesn't lie in moral worth but in using one's intellect: from the appalling initiation ceremonies of the vampire elders, Noell deduces their essential secret.

The message isn't that there are things with which mankind wasn't meant to meddle, but -- much more modern -- that it's supremely important to understand seeming horrors. Vampirism turns out to be neutral; the empire of fear is a tyranny of ignorance. Empire's baddies, including the immortalized Richard Lionheart and Vlad the Impaler, are the despots who, like large sections of our Government, prefer truth to be hushed up, in case it makes you free. There are grisly parallels with the transmission method and superstitious terror of the 1980s scourge which also came out of Africa.

Despite a slightly indigestible lecture towards the end (the scene shifts to the alternate 1980s and vampires are re-explained in terms of modern genetics), this is a classy, thought-provoking book -- Stableford's best fiction yet.

Meanwhile, without being the talented Michael Bishop's best yet, or Philip K. Dick's either, the Bishop novel Philip K. Dick Is Dead, Alas (Grafton, 411 pp., £3.99) is a creative pastiche which Dick ~~ought~~ to have written and would have liked to read. Confusing? Of course: a surreal and paranoid confusion about reality is the Dick trademark.

In this alternate timeline, the diabolical President Nixon is in his fourth term, and after winning in Vietnam is running Amerika as a barely disguised police state. Philip K. Dick died in this 1982 just as in our own, after making it as a mainstream author whose SF never got published. Now his ghost keeps bubbling through the structure of reality with a master plan for the world's redemption -- through the funny, eccentric, oppressed people-in-the-street who just as in a real Dick story are the ineffectual heroes.

Bishop's ~~un~~blurring of realities is more controlled than Dick's own (in some PKD books like The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch it's impossible to work out which sections are 'real' and which hallucinatory), and so is his grammar. He uses 'a few too many words, making this the fattest book Dick never wrote, but the plot has the right sort of lunacy. A nice work of homage.

Incidentally, I'm deeply grateful that the Bishop novel is a one-off fireworks display, not just the first of some multi-authored series to be called (say) 'Philip K. Dick's Whacky Realities'. Too much to believe? Recently we've seen obscure author Gentry Lee writing the bulk of a supposed Arthur C. Clarke novel, Cradle (lousy, incidentally). Worse is coming: America now offers series like 'Roger Zelazny's Alien Speedway' and 'Isaac Asimov's Robot City'. The famous name gets put on the cover and hypes up the sales; unfamous journeyman authors do the actual writing. Anyone want to write 'Dave Langford's Hatchet Reviews'? I'll ~~only~~ ask for 75 per cent of the revenue....

Speaking of Isaac Asimov, note that his Fantastic Voyage II: Destination Brain (Grafton, 480 pp., £3.99), though billed as a 'sequel to the classic Fantastic Voyage', isn't. Voyage began as an amusing but scientifically illiterate 1966 film. In his flattish novelization, Asimov managed to clean out the screenplay's grosser idiocies. But for years it nagged at him: he wanted to Do It Right, and this book replaces the original.

Unfortunately, rigorous Asimov can't bring himself to believe in the technology of miniaturizing crew-carrying submarines to play Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea. Acres of woffling non-explanation are devoted to circumventing this, but not, alas, into making the new 'scientific' plot twists sound other than totally daft. If Asimov were commissioned to write a novel pushing 'creation science' (which he rightly loathes and rejects) it would come out no less lacklustre than this.

Asimov is one of the lucky few who can publish whatever they like. Most of Dick's 'straight' novels stayed unpublished in his lifetime, appearing only recently -- e.g. Mary and the Giant in 1987 (Gollancz, 230 pp., £11.95). Stableford, a British author, never found a British publisher for one of his best novels; another, The Walking Shadow, sold out so quickly that the publishers were annoyed by the need to reprint after only a few weeks, and petulantly decided not to.

Yes, I'm not alone in sometimes feeling -- however unjustly -- that publishers hate my Guts!

#### BEER-FLINGING CLIMAXES

'I don't know how you can read that sci-fi and fantasy stuff,' you have probably heard someone say, in tones implying that you also bite the heads off small

furry animals and keep coal in the bath. The bizarre thing is the way in which people reinforce these literary ghetto divisions from both sides.

'This novel's really good,' I remember saying to an SF fan in a second-hand bookshop.

'But it's a... detective story!' he gasped in stark terror.

'Ever so science-fictional, though,' I explained. (It was one of Peter Dickinson's: The Poison Oracle, plug, plug.)

'Er', the SF fan quaved, retreating, '15p is a bit much to pay.'

Much more forthright was the lady to whom I mentioned that John Fowles's last novel was of interest to SF aficionados. 'I'm not reading him,' she exploded. 'He's a novelist!'

But to the diehard SF addict, there are things more terrible and threatening even than crime writers and mainstream novelists. I made the mistake of telling one such chap that for my Xmas 1988 treat I'd reread three favourites: an eighteenth-century novel, a 1930s detective story and a 1980s fantasy (actually John Crowley's excellent Little, Big).

'Fantasy!?' he spat. 'You traitor. Fantasy is a terrible cancer which pollutes the precious bodily fluids of true SF.'

'Well, a lot of those fantasy quest trilogies are pretty dire,' I allowed. 'Especially the ones that go over five volumes.'

'All fantasy is intellectually corrupt. It's cheap escapism which denies the real scientific principles of the real world.'

I thought a bit. 'Ah. What you want is fiction which takes proper account of the established laws of physics and mechanics as we know them today.'

'That's right,' he said stoutly. 'Real Science Fiction.'

'So obviously you despise all those ludicrous fantasy stories about free power, perpetual motion and immortality, which go against thermodynamics; and reactionless space drives, which violate the conservation of momentum; and matter transmission, anti-gravity, faster-than-light spacecraft, ansibles and time machines, all flagrantly in breach of relativity.'

'That's different,' he said. 'It's a question of... the scientific attitude, the world-view in which everything in the universe is rational and can be known.'

'Except', I sniggered deplorably, 'that there's a famous theorem by Godel which proves that even the abstract universe of pure mathematics is riddled with undecidables... true facts you can't ~~ever~~ know are true.'

The argument went on. A lot of it seems to be prejudice about what you actually call the plot devices: floating a rabbit out of one's hat by a spell is mere shoddy fantasy, while doing the same thing by psychokinesis is SF and therefore OK.

In the end my pal won the debate by teleporting beer all over me and stamping out of the room. I was left wetly thinking that for Gm readers that was a good finale: the beer-flinging climax to the conversation was psychologically correct even though in fact I made it up. Narrative truth doesn't demand morbidly pedantic accuracy....

One of that hardened SF fanatic's favourite authors is Hal Clement, a writer whose hair has square roots and who was born with a silver slide rule in his mouth. Still River (Sphere, 280 pp., £3.50) shows him at his most erudite, not to say readable.



I won't say you need a doctorate in physical chemistry to tackle this one, but from time to time I felt handicapped by having a physics degree only. In brief: five research students from different worlds are dumped on the extremely weird planet Enigma to fathom its arcane behaviour as their practical exam. After many mishaps they succeed.

Unfortunately the writing and characterization are flatter than a Euclidean plane. In endlessly protracted journeys through seething underground tunnels, there's barely a single vivid image to give life to the slow exposition of Enigma's gurgling internal oddities. Only one character -- one of the aliens -- comes alive a bit by virtue of a mild case of paranoia; even this doesn't lead anywhere.

Still River could have been gripping if told at a quarter of the length by Arthur C. Clarke or Greg Benford. But Clement is just too busy with his textbooks and equations to bother with narrative suspense. I finished it with a single crumb of satisfaction -- that I'd guessed before starting that the title was a pun.

'Just the sort of dumb reaction I'd expect from a low, crawling, fantasy lover,' I hear my hard-SF friend say....

Secretly he'd probably get a lot more enjoyment from Clifford Simak's collection Brother and Other Stories (Methuen, 165 pp., £2.95). Simak more or less invented his own genre of Folksy American Midwestern Pastoral SF, and was more concerned with moods than how his SF stage props actually worked.

His robots, for example, don't sod around picking loopholes in the Three Laws: they're too nostalgic, compassionate and kind to ants. The speed with which Simak characters leap intuitively to correct answers can be a mite unconvincing, but (unlike Clement's lecturing) doesn't plod. None of the four stories here feels over-long.

Be warned, though: they're definitely minor work, and the loathsome editor does his best to give away all the plots in an introduction. If you're new to Simak I'd advise starting with one of his novels instead: Way Station, Time and Again or, not quite a novel but justly celebrated, City (Methuen, 255 pp., £3.50).

Famous SF author Samuel Delany offers a new edition with a new introduction -- by a pseudonymous Delany -- of Tales of Neverson (Grafton, 335 pp., £3.50)....

Hard SF Fan: Aha, caught you! Sneaking in another horrible lowbrow work of fantasy, eh?

Myself: How many fantasy epics do you know that are full of semiotics just like The Name of the Rose, with an approving quote from Umberto Eco Himself on the back?

Fan: I didn't read Name of the Rose; it was (ugh) mainstream.

Delany's weirdly analytical fantasies are beautifully written (most of the time), heavily didactic (some of the time), but completely unlike anything else around. The stories shouldn't be missed; ignore the pretentious apparatus of esoteric epigraphs and an appendix (by another pseudonymous Delany) about 'the modular calculus'.

Brilliant and original stuff, honest. Mind you, at least one of the sequels is terrible.

#### THINK BIG

SF writers are deeply addicted to the business motto 'Think Big'. If you're going to blow up a continent as part of your plot's love interest, why not do it properly and detonate the planet? The galaxy?

Likewise, if you fancy writing about a big artifact, why not make it absolutely bloody mega-colossal? It might be fun to compile a list of famous big constructions in SF.

Well, forget Ringworlds and Orbitalsvilles, those merely (sniff) possible objects. I mean, for goodness' sake, they're finite! The three biggest urban development sites in SF are probably:

- (1) Rudy Rucker's infinite place Cimon, in White Light, which stretches past ordinary infinities through and beyond the 'inaccessible numbers' and other domains which mathematicians take too long to explain.
- (2) Christopher Priest's Inverted World, a hyperboloid which extends to (a conventional) infinity at both poles and all around its equator.
- (3) Greg Bear's 'Way' from Eon, a tunnel infinite in one dimension only, whose detailed space-time engineering makes it the most plausible Big Place yet.

Having thus Thought Big, Bear now strives to Think Bigger and outdo Eon with its sequel Eternity (Gollancz, 399 pp., £12.95). He's a destructive little chap, having already polished off the Earth three times via biological transformation (Blood Music), nuclear holocaust (a minor subplot of Eon) and alien doomsday weaponry (The Forge of God).

How to follow these acts? Clearly Bear has to destroy the universe, which he does perfunctorily quite early in the book, and bring his own infinite Way to infinite ruin. It's a skilled, mind-blowing read, with some nicely chilly aliens, but nevertheless it left me with an itch in the cerebrum and a sour taste in the medulla.

The itch? The reason the Way must be destroyed is that, skewering its way to the end of space/time, it's mucking up the orderly closing down of the universe. (Hurry up please, it's time....) But if it 'is' once at the end of time, isn't it still 'there', no matter 'when' it's destroyed?

The sour taste comes from the way that the Clarke-like sense of boggling horizons, which ended Eon and gets a brief airing early in Eternity, is thoroughly upstaged by Bear's final act of destruction. The nicer characters are nicely pensioned off, and the gates to infinity are slammed shut. Ambition should be made of sterner stuff....

There are doors to strange places in ~~John~~ Wolfe's There Are Doors (Gollancz, 313 pp., £12.95), a slightly surreal novel which achieves the difficult trick of making you doubt the hero's sanity even when the SF label on the jacket hints strongly that his weird experiences are 'real'.

In brief: nondescript salesman falls in love with quasi-goddess from elsewhere, her strangeness rubbing off on him and enabling him to pass without knowing through those Doors, in pursuit. Parts are funny, parts are hauntingly weird, and there's a thoroughly nasty SF notion lurking at the edge of the plot. As usual with a first reading of Wolfe, even this minor work, I suspect I haven't got to the bottom of it. (Translation: Wolfe excels at making me feel thick.)

#### MANY AND VARIOUS

A new Roger Zelazny, and not another blasted Amber book: A Dark Travelling (Hutchinson, 109 pp., £6.95). In its US edition I thought this a bit lightweight -- a nice idea or two but not enough tension or development, or for that matter words (those few pages are in big print). Here it's published as a children's book, which makes sense.

This is a slickly competent parallel-worlds story in which fantasy and SF elements are blended: both gadgets and witchery are used to swap worlds, the worlds themselves being 'lightbands' or 'darkbands' depending not on the output

of the local sun but on whether the rulers are goodies or baddies. Yes, it's really that simplistic.

So our hero, a teenage werewolf who's due for a nasty moment of puberty at his first full moon, joins forces with a witchy sister and a ninja pal to save the (or a) world from nameless technomagic, and guess what? They succeed, a little too soon.

Apparently the American series was meant to showcase hordes of SF themes: Zelazny did parallel worlds and Robert Silverberg, in the companion Project Penaulum (Hutchinson, 139 pp., £6.95), did time travel. The latter took about fifteen minutes to read and makes Zelazny's effort look densely plotted and overburdened with tense drama. Young readers would do much better to find a copy of The Time Machine.

Something completely different. One of SF's weirdest talents is R. A. Lafferty, who tells profound and/or bloodthirsty stories with high hilarity -- tall tales which he dares you not to believe. Now the story of his life and times is appearing in instalments, and gorbimey: it reads just like his fantasies.

Hero publisher Chris Drumm is the man responsible. Lafferty's non-fact history In a Green Tree has four volumes; Drumm has now published eight chapters of book 1, My Heart Leaps Up, in four booklets (54 pp., \$2.75, 44 pp., \$2.75, 53 pp., \$2.95, and 49 pp., \$2.75, post free from Drumm, PO Box 445, Polk City, Iowa 50226, USA). All contain unclassifiable gems from one of SF's few genuine Living National Treasures.

For a while I've been meaning to annoy the 'only printed words can be true Art' fans by mentioning comics.... Something comics fans have probably been saying long and loud is that certain 'collected works' books now being heavily pushed in the shops look suspiciously like rip-offs.

Take Volume 9 of Alan Moore's nifty Swamp Thing (Titan, £5.95), whose introduction gets up my nose by flaunting such (deliberately subversive?) terms as 'lush' and 'floral' and 'hallucinogenic intensity', while as in previous volumes avoiding direct mention of the word 'colour'. These non-cheap reprints omit the originals' colour. Not lush at all.

Comparisons with the Watchmen book, or imported US Swamp Thing collections (lots more pages, full colour, comparable cost), suggest that these reissues are monstrously overpriced. And whether or not you enjoy comics, it's clearly artistic sabotage to drop a major feature like colour. When Titan start reprinting novels, will they edit out the adjectives?

Speaking of comics brings one to Harlan Ellison, who spies inform me has just received a terrific panning in The Comics Journal for pontificating not wisely but too loudly on the subject in Playboy. This reminds me of the legendary essay on Ellison's seventeen-year (now eighteen-year) delay in completing his much-hyped anthology The Last Dangerous Visions....

In 1987 Christopher Priest published a preliminary version of The Last Deadloss Visions, a polemic about LDV's saga of missed deadlines and broken promises. In 1988 the booklet was finalized with additional material (making it, incidentally, eligible for 1989's nonfiction Hugo Award, a notion I gleefully pass on as bound to enrage many).

To read the whole story, including the death threat, send £5 for a copy to Priest c/o Ansible Information, 94 London Road, Reading, Berks RG1 5AU. Like the Drumm booklets, you won't find this in W. H. Smith's.

#### ARTHUR C. CLARKE AWARD... AND ARTHUR C. CLARKE

The awards season's here again, meaning frantic catching-up efforts from lazy-sod reviewers (no names, now) who wish to retain job security by pretending to

have read all the Important Books long before they were shortlisted for prizes....

By the time you read this, the Arthur C. Clarke Award will have been announced and excitedly ignored by media worldwide. Seven books are shortlisted and I've read five, which isn't too bad.

Already reviewed in this column or its pallidly diminutive predecessor: Michael Bishop's Philip K. Dick Is Dead, Alas (good pastiche), Lucius Shepard's Life During Wartime (fragmented but brilliantly potent and colourful), Brian Stableford's The Empire of Fear (instant classic of scientific romance), and Ian Watson's Whores of Babylon (very unreliable-reality, very Watson).

To conceal the fact that I haven't read Gwyneth Jones's Kairos and Rachel Pollack's Unquenchable Fire (not so much through vile sexism as because everyone said 'Gosh, these are hefty and demanding and not to be read at your usual breakneck pace'), let's hastily discuss the remaining nominee, Rumours of Spring by Richard Grant (Bantam, 458 pp., £3.50).

Er, I liked it. Grant, I'd guess, has fondly studied John Crowley, Mervyn Peake and M. John Harrison, five-sixths of whom are good influences. Also he's written the first decent science-fantasy to make use of Rupert Sheldrake's fabled morphogenetic-field theory, which like anti-gravity and time travel may be dubious science but makes interesting SF. (As a gentle dig, Grant offers a character called Sheldrake who's full of hopeless herbal remedies and sympathetic magic.)

In Rumours, the morphic fields 500 years hence have got out of hand and become a forced draught of evolution in the world's last forest, which looks set to grow without limit and generally Take Over. Against it are pitted a dotty Crusade of delightfully ineffectual characters struggling with decaying technology. Much of this is very funny.

At the heart of the story Grant manages to have his cake and eat it too, with that Sheldrakean plot device twining three world-views — scientific, mythic-animistic, narrative — into a double reverse Gordian knot. Tachytelic evolution? Woodland spirits? Either, or both. One to read again, award or no award.

The award reminded me to take a belated look into Clarke's own 2061: Odyssey Three (Grafton, 302 pp., £2.99), quite rightly not shortlisted for anything. As a very lightweight read it's pleasant enough, if you skip the chunks of 'history of the world since 2010' padding and the hollow bonging portentous lines which end most chapters.

What's left? Some travelogue material about a trip to Halley's Comet, replete with worthy facts and schoolboy humour, and a chase after a mountainous Macguffin on Europa. Clarke is exasperatingly coy about this gigantic object, explaining first that it looks like ice but isn't, and then that it's frightfully interesting to persons of nudge nudge South African descent, and then dropping hints about the names of old Beatles songs, and then....

So help me, 158 pages elapse between all this and the soke end-of-chapter revelation of what this 'magic mountain' is made of. Pausing only for the obligatory mystical bit in which the original enigmas of 2001 are made duller and more mundane, Clarke lays foundations for yet another sequel and signs off. The blurb says this 'tells of humanity's evolution towards the stars'. It doesn't.

A Gwyneth Jones book I have read is The Hidden Ones (Livewire, 151 pp., £3.50), featuring the best-drawn punkish teenage heroine I've met in SF. Adele is prickly, unregenerate, severely bruised by life, terrified that her erratic mental abilities (poltergeist stuff, mostly) will get her slung into another institution. This indeed is the threat used against her by virtually every adult in the book, except one smiler who has more subtly exploitative plans.

There's a plot line about a rural fast-buck merchant whose naspy scheme for the local environment is just slightly too easily if not tritely defeated. Worthy stuff, no doubt, but it's Adele who sticks in your mind (and sneers at its contents, and starts hurling the furniture about...).

Like Sheldrake's fields, Adele's telekinesis is a notion from the murky fringes of science. Sheldrake is cautiously mentioned in The Cosmic Blueprint by Paul Davies (Unwin, 216 pp., £5.95), a good readable survey of the quiet scientific revolution now taking place far in from the fringes.

Instead of a clockwork universe ticking in Newtonian cycles, they're talking about infinite chaos and unpredictability emerging from the simplest of starting points... and about higher levels of order and organization growing from chaos. Davies offers a glimpse of an optimistic, evolutionary arrow of time which is a cheery change from the all-too-familiar entropic arrow that points to nothing but a final chucking-out time. From my regrettable viewpoint as an SF writer, this looks like a marvellous source of story ideas. Pinch a few for your own SF scenarios.

One cavil: the illustrations are awful, murky scraps of graph paper and palsied sketches apparently drawn while the train was going over points. Unwin should have invested a few bob in nice graphics.

#### HOW TO ANNOY A REVIEWER

Publishers, as writers know from bitter experience, work hard to avoid publicity and discourage favourable reviews, which only make the authors uppity. Here are some of the tricks which keep enthusiasm to a minimum.

- (1) If a reviewer obviously likes your author, quit while you're ahead and don't send the author's next book. In this way, publishers tried to avoid coverage of Terry Pratchett's and Diana Wynne Jones's last novels. I cheated and bought copies, but the reviews were grudging, grudging....

Ditto my comments on Robert Rankin's unclassifiably funny The Sprouts of Wrath (Abacus, 248 pp., £3.99), not received for review. Again nameless occult and sidereal forces converge on that most ancient of sacred sites, the Brentford gasometer. Again Rankin's shifty, beer-swilling eccentrics confront fates worse than regular employment. Again Langford fell out of his chair a lot. But grudgingly.

- (2) Go for the reviewer's weak spot. An overdose of Piers Anthony has left me notoriously apt to break out in a rash at the least exposure to puns and tweeze. Esther M. Freisner's new fantasy may be jolly traffic despite the unicorn (not to mention the pert-bottomed prince in tights) on the cover, but can one really bring oneself to open a book called Elf Defence? (Headline, 234 pp., £2.99.)

- (3) Deal mortal blows to the brain by sending 'shared world anthologies' in which many writers set stories in the same fictional 'universe'. Once interesting as an occasional gimmick, this has become an entire naff publishing category. Even if good stories are contributed, the collection will always be sunk by the leaden efforts of other writers who don't play well in these away matches.

Case in point: Tales of the Witch World 'created by' Andre Norton (Pan, 343 pp., £3.99), with a cast of thousands. Verily, popular Norton is for her fantasies melodramatic, with syntax backward and writing ~~rough~~, maybe too faithfully here imitated. I'm sending the blurb to the Advertising Standards Authority. 'Comparable with and often surpassing the works of J. R. R. Tolkien', indeed.

- (4) Send lots of short-story collections. No, there's nothing inherently repugnant about shorts, which some still reckon are the lifeblood of SF.

Unfortunately it takes as long to comment sensibly on each short as on a novel. One cunning retaliatory ploy is to concentrate on the title story, as follows...

Dark Night in Toyland by Bob Shaw (Gollancz, 190 pp., £11.95, fifteen stories) has a grimmer tone than previous Shaw collections, despite several very lightweight pieces; the title story is a pitiless SF examination of death and religion. As in good tragedy, the ending can be seen coming a long way off but stays effective.

Salvage Rites by Ian Watson (Gollancz, 223 pp., £11.95, fifteen stories) shows Britain's premier SF 'ideas man' flinging out endless notions, about half of them worth making into stories. The title piece (which coincidentally echoes Shaw's) is a nice bit of Grand Guignol yuck whose agreeably nasty finale doesn't actually make a lot of sense.

The Toynbee Convector by Ray Bradbury (Grafton, 277 pp., £12.95, twenty-three stories) is all Bradburian whimsy and poetry, not perhaps for hard SF fans. The title story is that old one about hoaxing the world into being nicer, as in several Sturgeon shorts, a Twilight Zone episode, and Watchmen. It's moving for just as long as you can avoid contemplating the stark unlikelihood of anyone believing the feeble deception involved. As usual, Bradbury improves as he gets further from straight SF.

- (5) A nasty ploy if you want to sink an SF/fantasy book is to have it sent out by Pengelly Mulliken Publicity... perfectly nice people whose name unfortunately gives reviewers agonizing bouts of Pengelly Mulliken Tension (PMT), since past experience has shown that parcels from their address often contain appalling books by L. Ron Hubbard.

This time, opening it cautiously with tongs and asbestos gloves, I found Robert E. Howard's World of Heroes (Robinson, 424 pp., £3.95, ten stories). Assorted Howard heroes tackle a variety of 'loathly demonic things that crawled hideously up from hell'. What passes for criticism in the fantasy world usually overrates Howard's writing on the strength of historical importance -- he invented sword and sorcery, including the famous phrase 'mighty-thewed' -- but these vigorous pulp adventures are infused with loony energy borrowed from his own distinct dippiness.

- (6) If the American title isn't sufficiently off-putting, change it to something worse. Thus Spider Robinson's Callahan's Crosstime Saloon collections have been boiled down for British consumption as Callahan's Crazy Crosstime Bar (Legend, 351 pp., £3.50, twelve stories).

Robinson's an odd case. So many SF characters are soulless ciphers that it seems churlish to complain of someone going too far in the other direction, but Robinson really lays it on with a trowel -- no, a JCB.

Callahan's regulars ooze empathy in glutinous streamers, like ectoplasm. They love each other, and they love telling each other how much they love each other, and they all laugh long and loud at the same tall stories and lousy puns, and they have this wonderful sort of caring group mind, and often the bones of a perfectly good story get lost in fatty accretions of schmaltz.

Robinson's learned a lot from Heinlein, much of it good, but including Heinlein's special rule that there is such a thing as a free lunch if you're one of the Right People, who get away with murder while reserving the right to liquidate outsiders for high crimes like bad table manners. (There is a word for the political theory based on this attitude, but it's been over-used of late.) The stories are readable and fun, but leave this aftertaste....

How can you ensure a favourable review from the likes of capricious me? Easy.



First invite me to a big launch party with lots of free champagne, as Unwin Hyman did recently. Also, make sure the book being launched is as good as Garry Kilworth's Hunter's Moon (Unwin, 330 pp., £12.95).

This is 'a story of foxes', much more sympathetic creatures than, say, the rabbits of Watership Down. It's very carefully researched, and Kilworth avoids the usual major implausibility of imposing an epic plot: real animals don't go on epic quests, and his foxes are real.

What do they do? Just try to live: through the last days of hunting in their wood, through redevelopment and the transition to urban life, through shoot-everything-in-eight rabies scares, through the terrors of dogs, cars, poison, all the machinery of civilization.

En route we learn a lot about the vividly three-dimensional and smelly foxes, their haunts, habits and food, their relative frailty — even a cat can give one a hard time. Kilworth adds some poetically appropriate myths, rituals and eschatology. There are minor lapses when the communications between foxes get faintly soap-operatic or where a bit of humour jars ('Vixens — who could fathom them?'), but in general they're emphatically animals, not people in funny suits.

This is a fine, moving book which I hope will swell the ranks of hunt saboteurs. Nice one, Garry.

#### LET US NOW PRAISE FAMOUS PERSONS

Let us now praise famous men. Arthur C. Clarke's Astounding Days: A Science Fictional Autobiography (Gollancz, 224 pp., £12.95) is pleasant enough, and more readable than Asimov's blockbuster chronicle of every shopping list and bowel movement of his life... but it does feel insubstantial. The trouble with literary autobiographies is that despite gaudy claims of past occupations ('lumberjack, nuclear physicist, short-order cook, pimp, President of the USA'), the typical author's life consists of sitting on one's bottom, growing ever more flabby and pallid as the years flit by.

Clarke's bright idea is to invite you for a ramble around his 1930-45 copies of Astounding SF magazine, with much humorous nostalgia and many a chatty anecdote. What a nice but tiresome old chap; you think as he repeats himself (in many pages of reprinted material) and calls unnecessary attention to his trophies (he's genuinely world-famous and shouldn't need to shore up his ego with dragged-in references to this award and that bestseller and how -- for the umpteenth time -- he gets invited to address the UN).

He has some fun with terrible old stories and their scientific howlers: cold rays, planets inside atoms, the 'ultimate prime number'. But rather too many good stories are merely mentioned without comment. Like 1066 And All That, this is only a sporadic collection of the history its author happens to remember.

Best bits: memories of the British Interplanetary Society's early enthusiasm. 'Mrs Edwards put her foot down on hearing of our intention to cast lead weights in her best saucepan.'

Worst omission, something essential for a book as rambling as this: an index. Slapped wrists to all at Gollancz.

Most unbelievably tasteless remark: 'And perhaps if NASA had remained faithful to the Greek pantheon, its luck would not have run out on 28 January 1986.'

Meanwhile, the Clarke Award for SF was this year won by Rachel Pollock's Unquenchable Fire (Legend, 390 pp., £3.99). This is a future fable set in the afterglow of a sort of Second Coming, in which the hot colours of Latin-American magical realism have now lit up boring old North America.

It's an age of everyday miracles, where divine manifestations are liable to

knock you down in the street, and small-town Americans worry about demons rather than Reds under the bed. The heroine is unfortunate enough to be selected by Something as the mother of a new prophet, and is not best pleased by this. Pollack's witty picture of the transformed USA is haunted by darkly primal imagery and shades of Yeats's 'Second Coming'. Recommended despite a surfeit of bodily fluids.

Traditional hard SF is represented by Stanislaw Lem's grimly uncompromising Fiasco (Orbit, 322 pp., £4.99). Once again (see Solaris and The Invincible), a human exploration team confronts a planet-sized enigma that can't or won't communicate in our terms. What to do?

In Fiasco the humans feel very much in control: the alien Quintans have a technology within shouting distance of Earth's today, while 'our' side boasts a later generation of world-wrecking sidereal energies. No problem.

But the Quintans seem too busy fighting each other to talk. Slowly it dawns on you that the murderous battleground to which they're reduced their entire solar system is Lem's own careful extrapolation of today's 'Star Wars' defence proposals. Meanwhile, step by logical step, the boys with the ultimate weapons decide that a show of force is the only way to gain the Quintans' attention. Once they've started down that path, they find it hard to stop.

Fiasco takes ages to get going: the opening is a good but barely connected short story whose existence is only partly justified by links to the blazing finale, when the most innocent and heroic (and over-thick) character of all makes the expedition's last mistakes. A good depressing read. (Nut see further thoughts on Page 40.)

Reissues not to be missed... Dying Inside by Robert Silverberg (VG&SF Classics, 188 pp., £2.99) takes the 'mainstream' chestnut of a man whose powers and potency are deserting him, and makes it new with the strong SF metaphor of a telepath whose talent is fading. Lucius Shepard's brilliant Life During Wartime (Paladin, 383 pp., £4.99) keeps just missing the awards it deserves. And Philip K. Dick's The Divine Invasion (Grafton, 270 pp., £2.99) is ever so justified by experience, is that readers who think 3 pounds rather too expensive can be suckered into paying 2 pounds 95. Now, by mysterious mutual consent, the 2 pounds 95 is becoming 2 pounds 99. You are supposed to be too dim to notice.

#### SWAMP VIPERS... AND RECENT SF

No longer can I claim total ignorance of these terrible things which happen elsewhere in GM magazine, and which I understand are called live role-playing. Now I too have descended into cavernous gloom, amid the savage clash and parry of rubber swords....

This was all an eccentric launch party for the Joe Dever 'Legends of Lone Wolf' spinoff material. My old pal John Grant co-wrote the novels, so I accompanied him on his heroic quest for publicity.

All the best epics involve gruelling journeys through pitiless conditions, and London Transport deserves credit for forcing us to stagger from Paddington to Charing Cross during a heatwave. Shrivelled and sweat-drenched, we finally attained the Chislehurst Caves, and it all went ape.

'You', I was told, 'are Sir Conrad, a knight who prefers the banqueting hall to the battlefield.' I begged to be something more like Langford Hackrender, barbarian scourge of the pulpsmiths, but this was not permitted. Shepherded by persons in arcane robes or knitted chainmail, a band of literati and media hacks bore their hurricane lamps nervously into the tunnels.

The subterranean journey was punctuated by loud encounters which were doubtless thrillingly choreographed if one had been able to see anything. I particularly

enjoyed the sadistic spectacle of a Radio Midlands chap being stripped of his symbiotic tape recorder and thrust whimpering into the darkness to hit things with a padded stick.

Our quest's goal was a dank, lamplit cavern where the party was plied with lethal cocktails and such delights as 'swamp viper' (which I found too late was smoked w/a... backbone, skin and all). As the booze flowed freely, several guests got very thoughtful about warnings that (a) no one should stray out of sight for fear of being lost in 22 miles of caves, while (b) there were no toilets down here. I cast a diplomatic veil over the ensuing scenes.

More role-playing fun lay in store as the now sodden visitors were invited to win a grand prize by solving riddles which costumed characters would pose on request. I'm afraid I blew it. Approaching a hideously made-up dwarf wielding an inflatable axe, I started with 'Excuse me, good sir', and at once she took huge offence.

Egged on by evil John Grant, I tried again: 'Hello, costumed person, tell me your riddle.'

'I'm not in costume, you bastard,' said Wayne.

As Messrs Dever and Grant were dragged piteously off to sign 1000 copies of the Beaver 'Lone Wolf' novels (review contract for these masterworks seized by eager Alan Crump), I located a native guide and headed back towards the sun, falling over from time to time....

Here is a completely serious novel of the future, Island Paradise by Kathy Page (Methuen, 192 pp., £11.99). This shows a world ruled by a new and awful moral balance in which war and killing are unthinkable, but by way of compensation you're expected to shuffle off voluntarily soon after your retirement. It's thoroughly gloomy and exceedingly well written.

But I think I detect uneasiness in the author, as though she were uncertain of how to handle SF. Euphemisms about Timely and Untimely exits, the former being the Price of apparent utopia, are relentlessly Repeated in Capitals to hammer the point home: who in 1989 goes on about capitalized Pensions and Funerals?

Then we hear about importing power from planet 'Three'. Quite apart from the economics of this (spaceborne solar collectors make more sense), it seems fairly daft to suggest that people won't carry on calling it Venus, or Mars. Page appears more concerned to steer clear of the SF slums than to retain credibility. Surely any old hack could work up something more plausible than her picture of a totally unguarded 'please take one' nuclear stockpile.

I'd rather read Page, whose characters are niftily drawn and who can write most of the SF crew under the table. Nevertheless, that fudging of SF themes leaves her world unfocused.

One of those old, er, traditionalist SF authors is Gordon Dickson, whose Chantry Guild (Sphere, 428 pp., £3.99) adds another doorstep weight to the seemingly endless Dorsai series.

Dickson is an interesting case. Like Poul Anderson, he started with escapist space-adventure novels and then began to get Heavy. The Dorsai or 'Childe' cycle is now supposed to be a panorama of human evolution, with a plot gimmick that justifies traditionally stereotyped characters: the race has split into specialized breeds of soldiers, fanatics, mystics, physicists, lavatory attendants, etc.

In theory you get a vast panorama; in practice you get action-adventure with interspersed dull bits about the meaning of it all. I rather lost patience with The Final Encyclopedia, whose hero abruptly realized that to save the universe he needed to lock himself in a library and meditate. The book ended as he triumphantly slammed the door. Chantry Guild is the sequel.

(I forgot to mention that for those unconvinced by one chap holding the fate of the whole universe in his hands, Dickson keeps explaining that he merely represents huge historical forces. Any reasonably astute historical force would, you'd think, hire more than one representative.)

So hero Hal Wayne awaits the spiritual insight which will save the plot. In hope of finding it he visits some mystics whose habit is to plod in endless circles: this proves inspirational. Dickson injects only a modicum of excitement via external threats (too easily disposed of) and flashbacks, and in 428 pages advances the situation by one small step. The universe-busting arch-fiend still prowls outside, undefeated, unchallenged, exactly as at the end of Encyclopedia. Oh God, this means another sequel....

Being Invisible by Thomas Berger (Mandarin, 262 pp., £3.50) was something of a relief after all those world-shakers. Its protagonist is essentially a wimp, trapped in a horrible job writing naff advertising copy, surrounded by oafish colleagues and intimidating women; and one day he discovers the knack of invisibility.

The result is low comedy rather than H. G. Wells's brutal moral fable, but Berger keeps his story 'realistic' and the laughs ring true. It gives an extra comic edge to the narrative when awful, tragic or humiliating plot turns are clearly always on the cards. SF author Bob Shaw once noted that if you really want to make people laugh, you should describe in unsparing detail one of the most dreadful things that ever happened to you. It never fails.

This applies too to Terry Pratchett's Pyramids (Gollancz, 272 pp., £11.95). One thinks of the Discworld books as being jolly little romps, but they gain comic strength from repeatedly dealing with final things like death... not to mention, of course, Death.

This time the hero is an assassin, a deceased pharaoh gets to watch (in spirit) his brains being extracted through his nostrils, an innocent bystander loses a hand, 1300 unhappy mummies reveal how thoroughly rotten they've found the afterlife, several people are fed to crocodiles, and I can't even bring myself to explain what happens to the tortoises. Basically, we are not talking P. G. Wodehouse here. Horribly funny and well up to standard.

I'd have been much more nervous if Pratchett had scripted that psychodrama in the Chislehurst Caves....

#### ALARMING DISCOVERIES IN THE WRITING BUSINESS

When you've been around for a bit in the writing business, you make the alarming discovery that your infamy has spread wider than you knew. I said loud and rude things on seeing one of my parodies shortlisted for a 'Girgimesh Award' in Spain... not having been told (or got any money from) the fact of its even being published in translation.

The Girgimesh criterion of 'first Spanish publication in 1987' made for some strange bedfellows, with ancient Leiber books and mid-period Ian Watsons up against newish stuff from Silverberg and Bear; the 1980s Silverberg very properly losing to Silverberg-1972; and best of all, Clive Barker tying with that other rising horror megastar Walter de la Mare (died 1956).

It was nice to see the dear old Nicholls/Langford/Stableford Science in Science Fiction winning another of these awards, though I still haven't seen a copy of this Spanish edition, or the German one, or the Swedish one which rumour said was being heavily rewritten to replace parochial references to British and American SF with matters of more widespread global importance, i.e. Swedish SF....

Second Variety by Philip K. Dick (Gollancz, 395 pp., £12.95, twenty-seven stories) is Volume 2 of the collected stories of the SF writer who :: reality transform ::

butterfly dreams :: Zen override hallucinatory meta-God loop :: kipple and potsherds :: we are completely surrounded by vugs :: different, unique and impossible to summarize.

You could say the same about Samuel Delany's Neveryon books -- all Grafton paperbacks whose titles contain weird accents that our printers would rather not know about. They look like fantasies but are deeply subversive. Tales of Neveryon and Neveryona are thick with anthropology, semiotics (you know: a semiotic is half an otic), conscious artifice, and Delany's trademark of fanciable young men with bitten fingernails. Flight from Neveryon climaxes in 'The Tale of Plagues and Carnivals', its fantasy plague cross-cutting with Delany's personal dismay as his New York gay community was decimated by AIDS. It hits hard.

Small press spot: The Many Worlds of Larry Niven is a very complete-looking bibliography from Drumm Books (63 pp., \$4.50, address above). I tried without success to catch it out in likely omissions like Niven's fanzine articles or obscurely published nonfiction. (But the title of his first novel is mistyped on page 1 and twice more on page 63, so there.)

As usual, my word processor is overshadowed by a vast and teetering tower of stuff I can't actually face reviewing. (Warning to publishers: all fantasy/SF gamebooks fall into this category.) The most off-putting current title, by a short head, is The Devilgod in the Empire of the Universal Master by Collins Jallim (Book Guild, 160 pp., £10.50).

But the star prize for resistability must go to James V. Smith's Beastmaker (Grafton, 336 pp., £3.50). The cover shows the book's diabolus ex machina -- 'It Lives To Kill!' -- possibly the silliest-looking unspeakable horror to be portrayed on a paperback. Little bulging round eyes, cute stubby horns, carrot-sized claws, rows and rows of grinning pointy teeth, lashings of saliva, grey fun-fur, and a faceful of scales, all leaping out at you in glorious bas-relief. Could any book live up to the hilarity of this monster? Well, I checked the back page for that guaranteed laugh-line 'THE END -- OR IS IT?', and yes, in paraphrase it was there....

To provide the obligatory mention of Terry Pratchett, he confides: 'I'm giving Discworld a bit of a rest, you'll be madly interested to know. Not because the ideas aren't coming, but because this angel appeared to me and said, "Look, you don't have to write two a year, honestly"; so I'm working on some children's books and other stuff.' A stay of execution is thus granted to vast and fear-crazed Scandinavian forests.

Lastly, it would be wrong for me to review Dark Fantasies, edited by Chris 'Slime and Chainsaws' Morgan (Legend, 349 pp., £5.95), an undoubtedly ace collection of sixteen subtle (as opposed to raw-liver revoltingness) horror stories by people I know, including me. In fact, to maintain my impartial attitude to this incredibly brilliant anthology, I haven't yet read it.

#### FACING THE CRITICS' MAFIA

In the skimpy tradition of humorous SF, John Sladek occupies a special place for his satirical novels, usually set in a bizarrely mechanized American Midwest of the future. 'I feel I ought to do my part in helping machines take over the arts and sciences, leaving us plenty of leisure time for important things, like extracting square roots and figuring payrolls.' His books have got steadily grimmer and closer to the present, until...

Bugs (Macmillan, 213 pp., £12.95) demonstrates the 'discreet cough' school of SF packaging, which seeks to woo a snobbish literary establishment by concealing any clue that this might be SF. Even Sladek's other SF novels are discreetly mentioned only as 'works'. Inside, the same Midwestern black humorist is at work, informing us that most people don't think but just run consciousness and conversation programs, often to hilarious effect but baffling Sladek's far more creative robots.

The naive English hero plunges into an American nightmare of ghastly jargon, a deranged computer industry, the 'Presidential Sanity Hearings', fast-food restaurants to chill the blood, and the quest to build a military robot: 'Most important of all, it needs to be someone the men can look up to.' When the robot reads Frankenstein, it naturally starts to get gloomy ideas about its future.

The plot is hysterical and unsummarizable, with many effective running gags. But beneath the hilarity are echoes of Gulliver's Travels and The Island of Dr Moreau, where the hero returns to see his fellow men in a new light, as barely disguised animals; or in Bugs, as empty robotic shells buzzing with insect data bits. You laugh and you shiver.

Killer Planet (Gollancz, 105 pp., £8.95) looks at first glance like a new departure for famous and lovable Bob Shaw... it's a 'younger readers' SF novel. The opening has an uncertain feel, with somewhat cruder construction than expected from Shaw: painstaking explanations of SF terms, a lone diehard idealist pitted against the entire (and of course wilfully blind) Stellar Authority, a major coincidence to kick-start the plot.

However, once we reach the stormy hell-planet of the title it's exciting stuff with many a spurt of adrenalin, reading rather like an escaped episode from the same author's Ship of Strangers sequence -- which is no bad thing. Two ingeniously daft SF coups ('Faraday! he half-shouted. 'Faraday's Cage!') and one crushing dose of Gritty Reality amply compensate for a somewhat painfully spelt-out Moral. Old-fashioned fun.

Very much older, a 1960 novel set back in the dying Ice Age, Roy Lewis's The Evolution Man (Corgi, 160 pp., £3.99) reads as though written yesterday and looks suspiciously like an influence on the writer who's coaxed it back into print -- you know, whatsisname, fellow with the turtles and Luggage and HOLLOW CAPITALS.

This hilariously deadpan satire takes us through the Pleistocene invention of all sorts of appalling things, all by the same remarkably articulate ape-man: fire, spears, marriage, arrows, cookery.... It's left to his rather less brilliant offspring to devise the even more fearful spin-offs, like religion, politics and national security. Grab this gem before it goes out of print for another 29 years.

Robinson Publishing keep doing voluminous anthologies like The Mammoth Book of Golden Age SF (504 pp., £4.99, ten stories), edited by that interminable trio Asimov, Greenberg and Waugh. As a selection of clanking 1940s SF, this one is OK provided you're an absolute newcomer. Anyone who's been around more than five minutes will own most of the stories here: four have long been incorporated into well-known novels. It seems peculiarly discreditable to sneak in an episode of Foundation itself, disguised under the 1944 magazine title.

With a sigh of relief I turned to Barbara Hambly's Immortal Blood (Unwin, 306 pp., £3.50), neglected on its appearance because of a naff vampire cover and mislaid until just now. Hambly continues to bring a reliable freshness to mouldy old themes: here a don and retired spy is hired not to hunt vampires, but as their agent to find out what rotten imitator of Prof. Van Helsing is murdering the vampires themselves.

The plot zips happily along with the proper number of expected/unexpected turns. I enjoyed it despite lapses in early twentieth-century background. (Did anyone still call a crowbar a 'crow' in this century, and could 'spanner' possibly be a synonym? Was Liverpool Street Station ever called Liverpool Station? The author of Alice never rose to be 'Professor Dodgson'. Etc.) Strange that the very rational hero, who knows that sunlight destroys vampires, never investigates magnesium flares or electrical discharge tubes but instead buys silver charms recommended by superstition alone.

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MICHAEL TOLLEY has written extensively about sf (see his 'Bear With Me' in SFC 67), and also about William Blake and much else besides. He teaches English at the University of Adelaide, where he is currently preparing a descriptive bibliography of Australasian crime fiction and publishing a small-circulation magazine in the field.

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VINTAGE TOLLEY:  
Reviews of SF books

by Michael Tolley

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THE DARK SIDE OF THE SUN

by Terry Pratchett  
(Corgi 552-13326; 1988  
((originally published 1976));  
159 pp., £2.50/\$A7.95)

STRATA

by Terry Pratchett  
(Corgi 552-13325-6; 1988  
((originally published 1982));  
192 pp., £2.50/\$A7.95)

Terry Pratchett is the author of the tourist's guide to the multiverse, otherwise known as the Discworld series or, if you want to be precise, Rincewind, magician manque (Invisible University, aegrot.); the tourist is called Twoflower. If you haven't yet read The Colour of Magic (1983), The Light Fantastic (1986) and Equal Rites (1987), then this review will have served its purpose by telling you that it is high time you did: the Discworld series is the best thing since The

Hitch-Hiker's Guide to the Galaxy and remarkably similar to it in tone, while still — and not only because it works the genre of fantasy, including sword-and-sorcery, rather than that of sf — managing to appear delightfully fresh and innovative. If you haven't met the Luggage, and if you liked Marvin, the paranoid android, then you still have at least one joy left in life. Douglas Adams seems to have helped Terry Pratchett to find his own voice; these two earlier books, now reprinted, show that he already had his own world.

The Dark Side of the Sun, which is space opera on a grand scale with a light touch, shows debts to C. S. Lewis and Harlan Ellison, among others; it reminded me a bit of some of Michael Coney's later work. People are trying to kill young Dom, even before he becomes Planetary Chairman of Widdershins, because they are afraid that he will find the Jokers' World, thus putting members of the Jokers' Institute out of a job. Everybody is looking for Jokers, because they are the equivalent to the deus absconditus of earlier theology, superbeings who have left tantalizing indications of their presence in the universe (add Arthur C. Clarke to the list of influences). Naturally, the murder attempts only encourage Dom to go Joker-hunting, along with the inevitable two companions, a Phnope and a Class Five robot, plus a small alien pet called Ig, which brings him luck. Probability mathematics (or mathemagics) are invoked to account for Dom's success rate (Lem has used this idea memorably, also). It makes for pleasant reading but does, at least in retrospect, bear signs of relative immaturity in style and characterization: lively, but uninvolved.

Strata shows that Pratchett had already invented the Discworld before he wrote the Discworld trilogy: he even had giant turtles on his mind, though this time in the world's oceans, not below the world (with four elephants between the turtle and the world — the idea is, nevertheless, discussed). Strata, that is, presents a Discworld, one which is already replete with fantasy elements, in a scientificfictional context. The heroine, Kim Arad, herself a skilled world-decorator and (decidedly spry) bicentenarian, is drawn to the Discworld (which we should really call a DiscoEarth) on a sort of treasure quest. She is accompanied by two aliens, a four-armed warrior Kung called Marco (who thinks

he's human and is even more belligerent), and a giant tusked ursine female Shandi called Silver. There's also a dim precursor of the Luggage in the form of a dumbwaiter, which Silver needs to preserve intact because when she gets hungry she chaps a character alarmingly -- and a curious raven. Pratchett has a lot of fun not only setting up his flat Earth, replete with Viking warriors, barbarians and wonders out of the Arabian Nights, but also explaining them technologically. He also has some very sound remarks on the conventions to be observed if you want to be friends with aliens. Strata is a splendid space opera, perhaps to be set roughly in the Lord of Light tradition, but highly recommended even if you don't want to argue about its affinities.

These new Corgi (or Signet) editions come with instantly recognizable covers by Kirby, which are not accurate when matched point by point against Pratchett's descriptions, but convey at least something of the author's exuberance.

#### GREAT SKY RIVER

by Gregory Benford

(VGSF 575-04303-2; 1988

((original publication 1987));

x + 280 pp., £3.50)

#### IN ALIEN FLESH:

##### SHORT STORIES

by Gregory Benford

(Gollancz 575-04142-0; 1988;

viii + 280 pp., £11.95)

Great Sky River is the first of a projected three novels and takes the hero and heroine off their planet, which is dominated by 'mechs' -- a variety of alien machine creatures -- into the 'great sky river', the Milky Way. Getting acquainted with Killeen and his world is a cumbersome process, partly because he includes within himself the personalities of several deceased humans -- the most informative of whom, Arthur, he keeps telling (infuriatingly) to shut up; Killeen lacks curiosity

about most of the things we want to know. Admittedly, he is recently bereft of his wife and home Citadel, on the brink of alcoholism, and worried about his son Toby; he is also given an updated, somewhat elliptical vernacular.

It is worth persevering with the story, which becomes exciting and even shocking in places, principally because Benford uses the eye-view of the humans -- considered the lowest form of life by the mechanical (and other) creatures they meet (with the possible single exception of a mouse) -- intelligently, as a means of locating the peculiar sources of human dignity. This is Benford's subject most particularly when the humans encounter a Mantis, a mech with pretensions to art and an obsessive, utterly alien interest in what Blake called the 'human form divine' as material for art.

In Alien Flesh is Benford's first collection of stories; there are thirteen of them, plus a poem, and they are, most of them, welcome. It is a pity that we do not have full references to their first printings, but on the other hand each story is given an Afterword by the author.

The poem, 'Blood on Grass', states that:

We are works in progress,  
suspended between the mouse's unsuspecting struggle  
and promises of crystalline infinities.

These words not only serve as an epigraph to the recent novel, Great Sky River, but they also indicate something of Benford's purposes in the short stories. The title story, 'In Alien Flesh', considers the idea of communicating by a more vivid means than language; the humorous 'Snatching the Bot' suggests that domestic robots might be having more fun than their would-be owners; 'Me/Days' uses the words of a computer struggling to develop self-awareness against its own programming; 'Of Space/Time and the River' engages the human narrator in an appropriation by aliens of the Nile so that they can play at being Egyptian gods.

The Afterwords are often illuminating, notably that for 'Nooncoming', which

Benford calls, perhaps fairly enough, an sf story in The New Yorker style; it is written against the grain of more simple-minded ecological assumptions. 'Doing Lennon' is itself a bit simple-minded to someone who would never pick Lennon as a hero-type (though Lennon is admittedly, in the story, put down in favour of Mozart); it was written well before Lennon's death but its republication now seems in bad taste; the Afterword expresses some of Benford's feelings about his subject.

#### THE DEEP RANGE

by Arthur C. Clarke  
(VGSF Classics 575-042267-2;  
1988 ((orig. published 1957));  
224 pp., £2.95)

The Deep Range began as a short story in November 1953 and as such was published by Frederik Pohl in Star Science Fiction 3 (1954). It reflects Clarke's early enthusiasm for scuba diving; it was after a visit to the Barrier Reef that he wrote the book, which was published in 1957.

#### CRADLE

by Arthur C. Clarke and Gentry Lee  
(Gollancz 575-04164-1; 1988;  
x + 309 pp., £11.95)

The idea of turning cowboys into whaleboys, home on the range of the west Pacific riding their torpedoes through the plankton prairies, makes

Clarke's hero, Walter Franklin, feel like an anachronism 30 years on, even though he is supposed to be working more than a hundred years in our future. The simple-minded assumption that we might provide 15 per cent of our future food requirements from whales, with no more solid opposition to the idea than from plankton farmers (who can be defeated by the economic argument) and predators such as sharks and orcas (which can be simply slaughtered) must give present-day readers the handicap of disbelief. Clarke provides his hero with a mysterious background that renders the gung-ho episodes of the early part of the book a little more interesting as a connected story than otherwise they would be. However, it is not until he becomes a top administrator that Franklin is given a serious moral challenge — from a Scottish Buddhist leader, of all things. (Clarke is gratuitously offensive to the major religions in elevating Buddhism to the status of the sole remaining 'faith' with a power to move the minds of men; he will also earn few guernseys from the women's lobby for his treatment of Mrs Franklin as scientist turned housewife.)

The issue of meat-eating versus vegetarianism is not discussed with any subtlety: what changes the hero's mind is the thought that we might meet superior aliens out in space who might judge us by our treatment of the other life-forms on this planet. If the book were to be used as a school text in a course on ecology, it might prove as double-edged as the rather similarly structured (though much more powerful) Dune series.

Cradle is a somewhat embarrassing attempt to combine science fiction with mainstream. The sf part is fine — it concerns a mission to 'repatriate' species from various planets that have served a time in a galactic zoo — although there is too little of it and it is swamped by the stories of the humans who become involved when the alien ship crash-lands on Earth.

It seems unfair to blame Gentry Lee for the awkwardness of the hybrid form: he is described in an ominous credits list as 'location manager' and 'producer', presumably in anticipation of a movie, whereas Clarke is the 'production designer' and 'director'. I'll blame Clarke, who should know better than to have a US commander in his early forties think he's fallen in love with a juvenile on the strength of a sex scene she plays with him in an amateur performance of Tennessee Williams's The Night of the Iguana. Because he gets a hard on, Vernon Waters believes he's behaving like a dirty old man; the surprise would be if he didn't get aroused, but at his age he should know it is no big deal, and that all the reader is likely to think is that Clarke, somewhat retardedly, has at his advanced age discovered dirty-old-manhood and can't wait to let the world know. The younger hero and heroine have embarrassing hang-ups going back to

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COLIN STEELE is the University Librarian at the Australian National University. I met him when he organized the first Canberra SF Conference; no doubt our paths will cross again. I'm not sure what Colin writes apart from his sf column for The Canberra Times; at any rate I'm pleased that a selection from these columns now appears in SF Commentary.

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#### STEELE COLUMN

by Colin Steele

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(All material has already appeared in The Canberra Times.)

##### PRELUDE TO FOUNDATION

by Isaac Asimov

(Grafton; 461 pp.; \$A29.95)

This quintet of sf works by American authors covers the so-called 'golden oldies' of the genre -- Asimov, Heinlein and Dick -- and the 'new blood' of Shepard and Bradfield. Heinlein and Dick died in the 1980s, while Asimov is 69.

##### TO SAIL BEYOND THE SUNSET

by Robert A. Heinlein

(Sphere; 446 pp.; \$A9.95)

Prelude to Foundation comes with an author's note from Asimov which indicates that the Foundation series that he began in 1942 now comprises six volumes and 650,000 words. Prelude to Foundation now becomes the first Foundation novel, and features a young provincial mathematician, Hari Seldon, just developing his concept of 'psychohistory', a process whereby the future can be predicted mathematically. A knowledge of the Foundation saga will help, but new readers will find likable, if far from complex, characters, a chase through a sprawling galactic empire of 40 billion people, a surprise ending, and yet another piece of Asimov's epic future history jigsaw puzzle in place.

##### BEYOND LIES THE WUB

by Philip K. Dick

(Gollancz; 404 pp.; \$A34.95)

##### THE SECRET LIFE OF HOUSES

by Scott Bradfield

(Unwin Hyman; 166 pp.; \$A34.95)

##### THE JAGUAR HUNTER

by Lucius Shepard

(Paladin; 429 pp.; \$A17.95)

Robert A. Heinlein's last novel, To Sail Beyond the Sunset, even more blatantly is a wrap-up of a life's work. Told from the vantage point of a centuries-old woman, Maureen Johnson Long, looking back on the twentieth century, it ties together novels such as Time Enough for Love and The Number of the Beast. It contains the regular dose of Heinlein preaching on society and its faults, plus the usual elements of soft porn. Heinlein's characters weren't much better delineated in his early 1940s stories in Astounding, when he and Asimov were the young turks of the genre, but then the stories were sparse and the futures believable. The long sprawling self-indulgent novels of Heinlein's last two decades sell well but reflect poorly on his reputation.

In contrast, Philip K. Dick got better and better as an author as his life progressed. Unlike Heinlein and Asimov, however, whose books in the 1980s brought advances of millions of dollars, Dick lived in poverty until that time. Now more of his work is in print than at any time during his lifetime. Beyond Lies the Wub, the first in a multivolume series that will reprint all of his short stories, covers stories from 1947 to 1955. As such, it is the work of an author learning his craft and overly relying on gimmicks. It is not yet the author of the novels The Man in the High Castle and The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch.

Some of the stories are published for the first time, such as 'Stability', in

which a rigidly controlled future world is challenged through time. Today the background detail of punched cards and pneumatic-tube automation sits awkwardly. More timeless is the title story, a reworking of the Circe myth, in which a visitor to Mars buys a wub, a pig-like animal, for food on the journey back to earth. The wub, however, provides more than enough food for thought.

The wry and bitter humour of the stories reflects Dick's fear of war, fear of the domination of machines, fear of consumerism, and fear of humanity's unwillingness to face up to the main issues of life.

Both Bradfield and Shepard are far more in the style and philosophy of Dick than of Asimov and Heinlein. Scott Bradfield's impressive first collection of stories, The Secret Life of Houses, reveals the human condition to be one of alienation and pain. Sandra in 'Unmistakably the Finest' is a Californian receptionist who finds temporary solace in a revivalist church and credit cards, but the former loses interest once the debts of the second pile up, and she retreats into insanity. Salesman Larry Chambers loses his family and his job when he dreams he is an Alaskan wolf, to such an extent that his waking life disintegrates to the point that 'life is calamity, catastrophe and annihilation'.

Bradfield's characters battle to enliven their tawdry lives by erecting their own strange barricades against American corporate life. Lucius Shepard has used the jungles of Central America to erect his barricades against American corporate militarism. His powerful collection of stories, The Jaguar Hunter, reflects his experiences in Central America, as in 'Salvador', with soldiers dehumanized by drugs and the weapons and brutality of war.

Authors like Shepard, Dick and Bradfield create characters on the edge of the civilized world. In contrast, Asimov and Heinlein believe they are the civilized world.

#### FOUR HUNDRED BILLION STARS

by Paul J. McAuley  
(Gollancz; 253 pp.; \$A34.95)

#### AN ALIEN LIGHT

by Nancy Kress  
(Legend; 370 pp.; \$A29.95)

#### ADULTHOOD RITES

by Octavia Butler  
(Gollancz; 277 pp.; \$A34.95)

#### THE FINAL PLANET

by Andrew M. Greeley  
(Legend; 302 pp.; \$A29.95)

#### DISASTER

by L. Ron Hubbard  
(New Era; 337 pp.; \$A26.95)

The first alien contact will be an event of cosmic significance. There have been many fictional portrayals of such contact, and this latest batch of five novels covers a wide spectrum of approach and thought. Such fiction also provides an opportunity, as in the case of Kress and Butler, to reflect upon mankind as aliens might see us; i.e. as a point of contrast for our emotions, prejudices and virtues.

Many stories from The War of the Worlds onwards have portrayed an inevitable conflict of races as in Dr Paul McAuley's Four Hundred Billion Stars, which is an impressive first novel from an Oxford University biological scientist. His scientific background ensures the convincing creation of a remote planet where a human project team

is investigating whether the local low-level life forms can be linked to the alien enemy, who kill themselves rather than be captured. McAuley's main character, an Australian-Japanese astronomer, Dr Dorothy Yoshida, who possesses telepathic powers, is forced into making contact. The reader empathizes with her genuine terror and a desire to unravel the scientific truth. The end result is one of the most notable debuts in sf in recent years.

In another impressive first sf novel, Nancy Kress's An Alien Light, it is the aliens, the Qed, who are bemused. As an ancient galactic civilization they have found that all races who possess aggressive tendencies have killed themselves

before entering space -- except humanity. The Ged, therefore, lure humans from a forgotten settlement on a distant planet to establish a controlled experiment in a walled city. Needless to say, the interaction between peaceful and military factions, let alone with a third mutated human group, is not what the Ged expect.

The inborn destructiveness of humanity has already taken place in Adulthood Rites as another developed alien race, the Oankali, save the remnants of humanity following a nuclear war. Dawn, the first volume of Octavia Butler's 'Xenogenesis trilogy', told of the attempts of the aliens to 'rescue' humanity by controlled interbreeding of the races. In Adulthood Rites, Akin, the 'male construct' of the heroine of the first volume, Lilith, faces a hostile world and the envy and apprehension of the human relics. Akin symbolizes what it is to be human and to be alien as Butler describes Akin being captured, sold and rescued before coming of age with dignity.

McAuley, Kress and Butler represent the creditable and imaginative side of sf, while Greeley and Hubbard represent the down side. Greeley, Professor of Sociology at Arizona University, clearly has decided what makes books sell, as was evidenced by his first sf novel, God-Game, a bestseller. In The Final Planet, a religious order sends Seamus O'Neill ahead to the human-settled planet, Zylong, with instructions to observe and not to interfere. O'Neill, a male chauvinist and stock Irish character, ignores this order almost from page one, particularly as he sees himself as the sexual saviour of all women -- or 'wee lasses' as he calls them. With dialogue such as 'Och, Seamus O'Neill, can you be that much of an idjit still?', most readers would have to be 'idjits' to read Greeley.

L. Ron Hubbard's dekalogy Mission Earth, of which the aptly named Disaster is the eighth, possess the same elements of fictional lowest common denominators. The aliens are in fact indistinguishable from the humans, and the satire on big business, consumerism and the American way of life has long since palled. Soltan Gris, the alien narrator and archetypal dumb gangster boss, and Jettero Heller, the alien 'all-American' hero from Voltar, actually leave the Earth for a while in Disaster, but the change in locale is not enough to rescue banal dialogue and a stereotyped plot. The textual layout remains one essentially for sub-readers.

Given the awfulness of Hubbard and Greeley in the context of these five alien-contact novels, the general reader almost needs a guide to sf authors -- as much as Kress's aliens need a guide to humanity!

#### THE HALL OF THE MOUNTAIN KING

by Judith Tarr

(Pan; 278 pp.; \$A10.99)

#### WAYLANDER

by David Gemmell

(Legend; 323 pp.; \$A12.95)

#### TROUBADOUR

by Richard Burns

(Unwin; 250 pp.; \$A12.95)

#### THE RING MASTER

by David Gurr

(Pan; 740 pp.; \$A18.99)

#### CARMEN DOG

by Carol Emshwiller

(The Women's Press; 148 pp.; \$A16.95)

The fantasy boom continues in publishing, with dollars more often the name of the game than dragons. Fantasy can now cover a wide subject scope, as these five paperbacks indicate.

A significant number of authors still remain, however, with quasi-medieval settings, with the result that their creations have to be exceptional to rise above the crowd. Dr Judith Tarr's The Hall of the Mountain King, the first of a now-completed trilogy, is competent but not top drawer, as Tarr reflects the usual struggles of light versus dark in a quest for a throne.

Less inspiring is David Gemmell's Waylander, in which the author lives up to his title of the 'John Wayne of fantasy writers' with a bloodthirsty

saga of the killer of a king who, in turn, is persuaded to save the nation.

Richard Burns's Troubadour, the sequel to Khalindaine, portrays a prohibition-type fantasy world in which alcohol and entertainment are illegal. Civil war between Royalists and Puritans erupts, and the main character, Streetpoet, sets out to restore both an emperor's sanity and that of his brawling kingdom.

Horror fantasy is an increasingly popular mixture of genres, but David Gurr's verbose The Ring Master is not one of its most successful products. A Wagnerian reworking of the rise of Hitler, it links the main characters with those from the Ring cycle in a search for the Holy Grail. Any historical satire is lost in an overlong saga of incest, corruption and decadence.

The Women's Press provides the fantasy highlight with a surreal novel, Carmen Dog from Carol Emshwiller, who has been described as a 'scrupulously strange' writer. Carmen Dog is a sparse, serious, yet funny novel of a world where animals are turning into women, and vice versa. Pooch, the main character, once a golden setter, is now a beautiful woman whose adventures in New York are decidedly picaresque. Emshwiller provides a fresh slant on the male suppression of most women's lives. The reader has come a long way in fantasy from dungeons and dragons to reach the world of Carmen Dog.

#### SECOND VARIETY

by Philip K. Dick  
(Gollancz; 395 pp.; \$A29.95)

These three short-story collections from Gollancz represent some of the best writing, past and present, in the sf field.

#### DARK NIGHT IN TOYLAND

by Bob Shaw  
(Gollancz; 190 pp.; \$A29.95)

Second Variety is the second volume of the comprehensive reprinting of all of the short stories of American writer Philip K. Dick, who died in 1982. There are twenty-seven stories, all, incredibly, written in eight months of 1953 and 1954, even before Dick had produced the first of his many novels. While several

#### SALVAGE RITES

by Ian Watson  
(Gollancz; 223 pp.; \$A29.95)

are now simplistic and gimmicky, the majority contain the Dick trademark of questioning what characterizes humanity against the monoliths of big business, growing technology and militarism. They also reflect, as science fiction did at that time, a criticism of the rampant McCarthyism of the early 1950s. The best stories illustrate these themes, notably the title story: the last military survivors of an American-Russian war are unable to identify as non-human the killer robots sent out by each side to finalize the war. Few can escape the process, and no one can afford to trust anyone.

Dark Night in Toyland, the title story of British writer Bob Shaw's fourth collection of short stories, uses 'bioclay', a medical restoration advance of the twenty-first century, to query the limits to which humanity can go in genetic engineering. A Methodist minister rejects the genetic replacement or illusion of life as his young son dies agonizingly of cancer. 'Cutting Down' provides a horrific vision of the unexpected side effects of a new slimming drug. Shaw queries the moral and ethical issues of scientific research in a sombre collection from this usually ebullient writer.

Ian Watson's collection of fifteen stories, Salvage Rites, has a title story of equal grimness, as a local rubbish-tip visit becomes not only a symbol of modern Britain but also a labyrinth from which there is no escape. 'Lost Bodies' juxtaposes the bizarre conclusion to an English fox hunt with the breakdown of a marriage.

Watson's and Shaw's collections share an underlying darkness and urgency. It is perhaps interesting to note that Shaw lives in the north of England and Watson in relative poverty amidst the rich shires of Oxfordshire. Like Philip K. Dick before them, they are clearly reflecting serious concerns in society through their fiction.

— Colin Steele, 1989



(CRITICAL HITS -- Continued from Page 32)

I usually try to set aside a spot to put the finger on some real clunker which made me shriek with boredom. Unfortunately I'm reviewing Information Technology: Agent of Change by Murray Laver for another publication altogether. Tough luck, masochism fans.

Instead, it's confession time. Grim-jawed members of the Critics' Mafia recently backed me up against the wall and posed hard questions like, 'How come you didn't slag off Lem's boring and aptly named fiasco in G 11?'

'I am not infallible,' I whimpered. I'd written too much and had to edit my column in a hurry, thus losing certain comments about Borges' and indeed Lem's clever practice of not writing some tremendously heavy novel but instead reviewing the book as though it had been written -- putting across the ideas without all that dreadful slog for the writer and reader. Fiasco, I failed to make clear, would have benefited greatly from this treatment. Please, take away that L. Ron Hubbard dekalogy now....'

They let me off with a reprimand, on condition that I made this public confession. It's a hard life in the Critics' Mafia.

-- Dave Langford, 1988, 1989

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(VINTAGE TOLLEY -- Continued from Page 35)

youth and childhood respectively; as they rub each other up the wrong way in consequence, it is inevitable that they fall in love.

I have news for Clarke: when demands are made for more characterization in sf, pale imitations of blockbusting soap operas are not what is desiderated. Another awkwardness is that the serious characters, who belong in sentimental romantic fiction, are pitted against crooks straight out of James Bond: not surprisingly, the odious leering Homer Ashford and his Amazonian associate Greta have their own shark pool. As long as the story, which is set in Key West and the shallow waters nearby where the alien ship is hidden, concerns the wonders of alien creatures and artefacts (a variation on the Rendezvous with Rama scenario), all is well, although I am less than happy with the wimpish conclusion. 'Should superhumans be repatriated to Earth (after millennia of development from the primitive stage on a distant planet)?' is the big question settled by personal intuition rather than reason. The human representatives, who admittedly have trouble enough in keeping their cool when dealing with more-or-less ordinary people, are not a whit concerned that the superhumans might have to be re-seeded on a planet less suited to the species, and would rather muddle along by themselves for a few more centuries than enjoy the challenge of learning from others not too obviously different from homo sapiens.

It's time childhood ended, Arthur.

-- Michael J. Tolley, February-July 1989