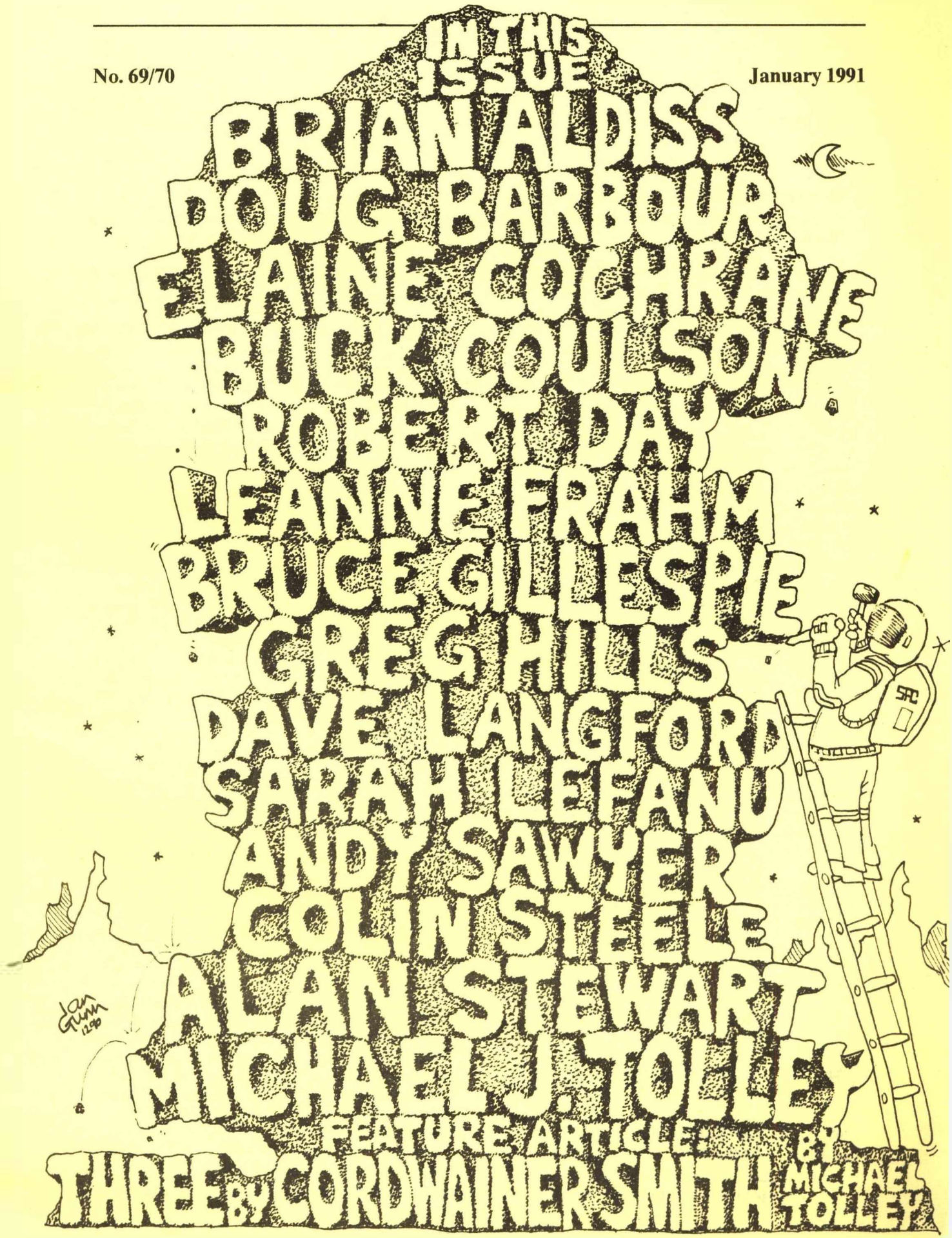
SF COMMENTARY

No. 69/70 January 1991



SF COMMENTARY

No. 69/70 **January 1991**

SF COMMENTARY, No. 69/70, January 1991,
is edited and published by BRUCE GILLESPIE, GPO Box 5195AA, Melbourne, Victoria 3001, Australia.
Phone: (03) 419 4797.

At least for this issue, *SF Commentary* is a magazine of short reviews of science fiction and fantasy books, and books of interest to sf and fantasy readers.

Proofread by Elaine Cochrane. Typeset in Ventura 2.0 by Charles Taylor. Cover and illustrations by Ian Gunn. Many thanks for help beyond repayment.

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I MUST BE TALKING TO MY FRIENDS

Vale, ASFR?

To survive the first burial of *ASFR* in 1969 took some doing, but to survive its second burial makes me feel ancient indeed.

The life of *Australian Science Fiction Review*, First Series, 1966–69, was short but glorious. That magazine, edited by John Bangsund and published by John with John Foyster and Lee Harding, created the Australian fandom we know today. It was funny, wise, penetrating and (to use Henry James's meaning) damned critical.

When four years ago John Foyster brought together a new team to publish the Second Series, I was sceptical about its prospects for success. I was wrong, of course. The Second Series worked. No other review/critical magazine, except the newish *New York Review of Science Fiction*, has maintained such a regular schedule at such a high standard of achievement. Even better, it provided a home for my own articles when I had neither time nor money to publish them myself.

Unfortunately Nos. 26, 27 and 28, posted together next month, will mark the end of the second incarnation of *ASFR*. The end has not been caused by animosity between members of the team – it's just that they are all too busy at Real Life to maintain the schedule.

I'm told that the *ASFR* team – John Foyster, Yvonne Rousseau, Jenny Blackford, Russell Blackford and Janeen Webb – will recommend that their subscribers get in touch with me after they've wept into their whiskey glasses. I'm not five people, and nobody would pretend that I can deliver the quality of recent issues of *ASFR*. But I keep chugging along.

Although I've given up making promises, I think I can guarantee the following:

(1) Publication of 'The Last ASFR Letter Column' in the next issue of *SFC*. I'm just keeping up a tradition: *SFC* No. 4 published the last letters from the first series of *ASFR*.

(2) Publication of all my material about science fiction, not just the short reviews, in *SFC*. *The Metaphysical Review* will be confined to the personal, musical, cinematic and literary interests of the editor and readers. It is possible that some ex-*ASFR* people might find *TMR* enjoyable as well – see subscription details.

In 2007, will there be a third incarnation of *ASFR*? Will it be distributed by post, fax, modem or microchip? (Will a postal service still exist?) Will the third series feature Keats and Chapman stories? Will *SFC* still be here to welcome it?

Thanks for the thank-you note

You know those parties. Introduced to someone interesting, I'm asked what I do for a living. 'I'm a book editor. Nothing glamorous. Secondary textbooks.' The other person's face settles into stony unexcitement. If it seems that the other person might be sympathetic, I say, 'But my *real* job is publishing magazines about science fiction.' Usually this propels the other person in search of a drink.

Sometimes the other person sees the point of what I'm talking about. The unspoken question is: 'But why do you waste your time editing secondary textbooks?' Or: 'But why do you publish fanzines if they don't earn money?'

We fanzine editors know and give the standard answers: self-expression; communication with interesting people across the world; showing what we can really do in the hope of gaining professional writing work; angling for review copies of sf books.

But after twenty-two years?

After twenty-two years, there is no hope that the print run will grow until the magazine supports itself and me. The print run for this issue is much the same as that for No. 1, January 1969.

After twenty-two years, there seems little hope that any subsidiary activities will make money to support the magazine and me. *SF Commentary Reprint: First Year 1969* needed to sell 200 copies to get back the money and time invested in it. Eighty copies are left.

After twenty-two years, there is no hope that anybody will offer me the editorship of a prestigious journal because they liked what they saw in *SFC*. Besides, I don't live in America.

After twenty-two years, there is no hope that someone will send me money to write lit. crit. for overseas magazines. The academics took over in the 1970s, and I don't have a Ph.D. or even a Master's.

After twenty-two years, there is no hope of winning a Hugo Award, although those three Hugo nominations in the 1970s are fondly remembered. These days, it would take a print run of at least 500 copies to score a Hugo nomination, let alone a win.

After twenty-two years, *SF Commentary* and *The Metaphysical Review* no longer run on hope. But they don't run on automatic, either.

The fuel for these magazines is pleasure — or rather, the Great Minor Pleasures of Life. Looked at objectively, none of these pleasures would compensate me for the time and money poured into these magazines. Taken separately, they make up the stuff of life, or certainly the stuff of fanzine-editing.

The collected *SFC*/*TMR*/Gillespie Ditmars are nudging each other off the shelf. Year after year, everybody complains about the Ditmars and the way they are awarded, but nobody minds getting one. The two recent awards (in 1989 and 1990) for Best Fan Writer gave me particular satisfaction.

And after twenty-two years, what greater reward could there be than the following thank-you note? It appears on pages 185–6 of *Bury My Heart at W. H. Smith's: A Writing Life* by Brian Aldiss:

> Occasionally — the miracle. A reviewer who has read all one's books!
>
> *Forgotten Life* won a very favourable review from Australia, from Bruce Gillespie, writing in the Melbourne *Age*. Bruce stands as an exemplar of a science fiction aficionado. Ever since 1969, he has poured his lifeblood into his amateur magazine, *SF Commentary* – amateur in the best sense, for it printed perceptive criticism of science fiction novels, stories, and trends, such as one rarely finds elsewhere. For a while, Bruce liked nothing he read, and denounced the whole mode. He disliked my Helliconia novels, and said so.
>
> As well as criticism, *SF Commentary* carries the story of all Bruce's personal troubles. Along with the latest adulation of Stanislaw Lem went the story of Bruce's failures with girls or — a recent event — the death of his father. Bruce visited England once, and stayed with Chris Priest, who was disturbed to find that his Australian guest ate poached eggs with his fingers. We three drove down to Stonehenge one sunny day, before Stonehenge was railed off from the public.
>
> In 1969, when *SF Commentary* began, Mike Moorcock's *New Worlds* was still thriving, and Gillespie and his merry men, John Foyster and the others, set upon it eagerly and understood it (even when they did not like its contents) in a way given to no other group of readers. Their comments remain fresh. Their comments remain fresh. I was praised for some of the original *Barefoot in the Head* stories in Issue 1 and damned for another in Issue 2. I also, I'm proud to say, had an article in Issue 2. Of course, no one got paid for their work. We never expected it in the SF field of yore. I have written thousands of words on such terms, for many fanzines which have proved far more ephemeral than Gillespie's publications.
>
> Perhaps one day some omniscient omnivore will examine the relationship between published and privately printed activity in the SF field, and show the literature for what it is — a tremendous populist movement of the century. He will surely have to reckon with the prickly intellects of Bruce Gillespie's *SF Commentary*.

Yes, it's pleasant to be thanked for my life's work. John Bangsund has done it several times, especially in his wonderful *This Isn't SF Commentary 26* (copies still available from me if anybody's interested). George Turner wrote about *SF Commentary* in *In the Heart or in the Head*, which he dedicated to me. (Perhaps that's why I've never felt worthy to review it.) I found myself on the dedication page of Damien Broderick's *Transmitters*, which at one stage was going to be based on the more agonized bits of my life story.

These mirror glints keep me going, as do all the remarkable letters I receive.

But Brian Aldiss's thank-you note is a high point of my career — not 'career' in the usual sense (I'm still waiting for it to begin), but the inner career, the unseen pattern of steps one travels to some unknown destination.

Like John Ford, Brian has chosen to print the legend rather than the strict fact. He seems inaccurate to refer only to *SF Commentary*, leaving out any mention of *The Metaphysical Review*. But this is one of those mistakes that is more truthful than the truth. For many people *SF Commentary* is Bruce Gillespie's magazine, and always has been. Should I bow to the truth of the legend? Should I abandon *TMR*, now that I've revived *SFC*?

But Brian remembers why I abandoned *SFC* for eight years. I thought I should continue to cover the field, but by 1981 I was so disgusted with nearly everything I read in sf and fantasy that I was willing to ditch a magazine with 'sf' in the title. By 1989, the problem no longer existed. The field has grown so huge that I could cheerfully abandon hope of covering it. Now I feel free to pick the ripe apples off the rotten pile and ignore the rest. Even the ripe apples have piled up. Hence the revival of *SFC*.

But I still relish publishing *The Metaphysical Review* as a separate magazine that covers all the other subjects that interest me and my readers — music, films, general literature and the like. *The Metaphysical Review* continues, when I have the time and money to publish it.

Brian remembers the excitement of the early days of *SF Commentary*, which coincided with the great days of *New Worlds*. Combined with the excitement sparked in America by *Dangerous Visions* and the Ace Specials, the pages of *New Worlds* promised a bright, shiny, vigorous and rigorous new science fiction. By 1975, it was plain that the readers had let down the writers, and the New Wave dissolved. But many of the most enjoyable books from 1969 to 1975 are still in print, and some of us retain a *New Worlds*-based image of how good science fiction could be.

I didn't ever eat poached eggs with my fingers, but my American–English pilgrimage of 1973–74 is spiked with Gillespie solecisms much worse than that. The legend endures; I'm glad no one can remember the facts. If ever I travel again, I'll stay in hotels, not bother people in their homes.

Chris, Brian and I did go to Stonehenge together. It was the last day of my five-month journey. The vital difference between Brian and me is

that I remember the howling storm that greeted us at Stonehenge and drove us away from the place, while Brian remembers that it was a 'sunny day'. We are both right. It was the *only* sunny day of my month's stay in England, but the Druids plonked a storm on us during our half-hour at Stonehenge.

Brian Aldiss's optimism glows through every page of *Bury My Heart at W. H. Smith's* (Hodder & Stoughton; 221 pp.; probably $A29.95). It's not an autobiography. In a recent letter Brian said he probably would never write one. Instead, it's a combination of a long thank-you note to many friends and a recruiting document for the life of a writer. It's full of amusing and amazing stories, and introduces us to many of those English literary identities the rest of us will never meet.

My only beef against *Bury My Heart* is that in it Brian does not devote space to John Bangsund, John Foyster and Lee Harding, the true heroes of Australian fanzine publishing. Why me? The disciple merely followed the masters. But *Bury My Heart at W. H. Smith's* is a compact volume, and much obviously had to be left out. Volume II soon?

— Bruce Gillespie, 6 November 1990

PINLIGHTERS

LEANNE FRAHM was delighted not only that I had reviewed and liked her story 'On the Turn' (*Matilda at the Speed of Light*) in *SFC* 67 but also that '*Matilda* had been reviewed in such prestigious publications that I have never heard of them — *The Age Monthly Review* and *Australian Book Review*'. Leanne asked for copies of the other reviews: 'I would like *feedback*, which is something I don't usually get from the American anthologies I've been published in.' Leanne lives at Slade Point, Queensland.

I sent Leanne copies of the other reviews: 'Do I infer from your opening paragraph that the publishers should send contributors copies of reviews? It didn't happen, but Double Wow! if it had.' Yep. It's not Damien Broderick's job (as editor of *Matilda*) to send out reviews, but the publisher's. At least that's what I assume when I send copies of *SFC* to publishers, because usually I don't have authors' addresses.

'On the Turn' was my favourite short story — of any type — read during 1989.

ROBERT DAY,
'Ashgrove', Didgley Lane, Fillongley, Coventry CV7 8DQ, England

In *SFC* 67, Michael Tolley's piece on Greg Bear had much of interest. Either I've been missing the sercon zines for too long, or very few people are subjecting the current crop of American sf writers to scrutiny: Greg Bear, David Brin and the like. Brin I once described as 'Niven with characters'. I'll return to Card later.

As for Greg Bear, might I comment on *Hegira*? *Hegira* felt as if it were from a series of linked short stories, and I had missed the first. This is, at the same time, both a weakness and a strength. It is a weakness because it leaves the reader to sort out a lot of basic material about the world depicted and the characters' roles in it; indeed, in *Hegira*, the main character changes about one-third of the way through. On the other hand, this leads to astrength: if much background information is missing, doesn't that give a book a level of realism for which some writers labour for years? Isn't that what life itself often feels like — as if there are bits of the jigsaw missing?

Strength of Stones is set in the same universe as another Bear novel, one that was not discussed by Tolley, *Beyond Heaven's River*, which is set much earlier than *Strength of Stones*. The central character of *Beyond Heaven's River* is a World War II Japanese pilot who was kidnapped by aliens in 1945 and is discovered on a deserted planet centuries later.

Orson Scott Card's *Ender's Game*. Yes, it *is* rather unpleasant: the whole book depicts the brutalization of a child, but the point is at the end, when the central character, Ender Wiggin, realizes that he has been tricked into xenocide and is a hero, very much against his will; and as a penance he carries the alien queen's cocoon with him as if he were some interstellar Flying Dutchman. In the sequel, *Speaker for the Dead*, another sentient alien race is threatened with extinction, and Ender Wiggin goes to its world, eventually to redeem his crime. By this time Wiggin has become the Xenocide, a pariah amongst humans (if anyone recognized him). The hero worship has gone, and Wiggins is grateful for it.

Card's novels are all technically fine, but have elements of Grand Guignol in them. As a friend of mine said, 'I dread to think what sort of a childhood he had.'

I've revised my opinion of James Morrow now that I've re-read *The Continent of Lies*, although I still think his first novel quite awful. I did quote his comment about Terran sector Navy vulcanbombers ('could make adults forget they'd ever been toilet-trained') at an airshow when a real Vulcan bomber was going through its paces. (It got a laugh from a B-52 crew).

In your review of the Sheckley reissues, you've perpetuated the myth that Douglas Adams evolved his writing out of Sheckley's. 'Fraid not. Adams was a BBC script editor before writing the piece for radio that sparked off the 'Hitch-hiker's Guide to the Galaxy' phenomenon. He had no sf background at all, which makes his success even stranger. His satirical use of old sf devices was gained wholly from his time as a script editor for the BBC, working on *Dr Who*, but the rumour went around that 'Douglas Adams' was a Big Name Author writing radio under a pseudonym. Not as bad a mistake as believing James Tiptree Jr was a man, perhaps, but still pretty wide of the mark. The really strange thing is that publishers now trot out Douglas Adams for cover blurbs on humorous sf novels as if he were the originator of funny sf stories.

Douglas Adams is improving in his old age. The 'Dirk Gently' novels show signs of excellence. The first had a plot- line of great ingenuity, even it it was based on an old *Dr Who* script (albeit one of the best, 'City of Fear').

PS: My new employers don't know what I'm doing yet. I've been put on a section called 'Enforcement', though what I'm supposed to Enforce, on whom, and with what, remain unanswered questions. I suppose that makes me an Enforcer. Must polish up my Clint Eastwood impersonations. (It turns out I'm Enforcing the legislation on private water companies: so there.)

(3 November 1989)

You didn't convince me to go back to Orson Scott Card, Robert, but you reminded me that I received review copies of Douglas Adams's 'Dirk Gently' novels, and still haven't read them.

I've just finished Jack Womack's two cyberpunk novels, *Ambient* and *Terraplane*, and I for one am most enthusiastic about them, even if the level of violence in them is quite high – violence made worse by its cold under-statement. One of the premises of *Ambient* – that the Western economies collapse because of American religious fundamentalism – does strike me as a little unlikely, but if anyone had told me two years ago that the so-called 'socialism' of Eastern Europe would quietly shrivel up and die, I would have thought *that* unlikely too.

I'm also reading David Zindell's *Neverness*, which has me turning the pages despite its doorstop size and its tendency to lapse into science-fictional gobbledegook – pilots negotiate 'thickspace' by entering a trancelike state and intellectually grappling with the laws of mathematics, a device that reminded me of Dave Langford's 'Axiomatic Space Drive', which at no time exceeds the speed of light but merely *redefines* the value of c to any desirable figure upwards of 186,000 miles per second.

(20 May 1990)

SARAH LEFANU,
The Women's Press Ltd, 34 Great Sutton Street, London EC1V 0DX, England

Thank you for the suggestion you made some time ago about publishing Janet Frame's *Intensive Care*, which is of course an excellent idea. For a long time we were the sole publishers of Janet Frame over here, but then we had a bit of a bother over *The Carpathians*, which Bloomsbury published in the end. The problem, I think, has been not so much with Janet Frame but with agents at work (as is often the case!). Although I am actively, if not aggressively, pursuing *Intensive Care*, I haven't yet got very far.

(27 November 1989)

That's where things seem to stand, although since the end of 1989 Janet Frame has jumped in status from New Zealand's Best, Least-Read Author to Media Superstar. Jane Campion's film *An Angel at My Table*, based on Frame's autobiography, is turning away audiences in Melbourne, and will probably repeat the trick in Britain. (I haven't seen it yet, because people keep saying you can't get a seat at the Longford.) *Intensive Care*, still out of print, is a novel that covers 150 years, beginning with World War I. The final segment, set in a post-atomic war New Zealand, drags the book under the sf umbrella. Maybe it will sneak into the *next* edition of the Nicholls/Clute *Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*.

DAVE LANGFORD,
94 London Road, Reading, Berkshire, England RG1 5AU

Re. *SFC* 68: Despite my misgivings, I was quite pleased with your edited '80 per cent' of the *GM* stuff. On reflection, I think I would have cut out one or another of the slightly too many references to Terry Pratchett; and I should have mentioned that Wayne (surnameless associate editor of *GM*) is a somewhat extraordinary figure to look upon (torn this, leather that, studded t'other, and an alarming sunburst of bleached hair), while the Alan Crump who gets a passing mention writes another review page elsewhere in the magazine.

I can't agree that there were too many references to Terry Pratchett. For a start, they convinced me that I really should read his books. For another,

Terry Pratchett becomes so much a character in your columns that he unifies them into one *SFC* article.

A puzzle in Dave Langford's columns was the word 'naff':

> Naff is a recent(ish) British concept, somewhat corresponding to 'non-U' but in terms of style in the abstract rather than mere class. Mind you, I'm only guessing, or rather passing on my own intuitions. Somebody did a tongue-in-cheek *Complete Naff Guide* back in '83 or so, containing much invented wisdom about naff and non-naff things, and Malcolm Edwards gave the world his fannish version.
>
> (27 March 1990)

ANDY SAWYER,
1 The Flaxyard, Woodfall Lane, Little Neston, South Wirral, Cheshire L64 4BT, England

> Nice to see large chunks of Langford in *SFC*: much of this has been missed by me because of all those vast crowds of people standing in my way whenever I go to W. H. Smith's to stand in front of the magazine rack pretending that I'm browsing but actually looking for *GM* so I can read Langford's column. Everyone else seems to be doing that as well. I think if I were a bookshop manager I'd walk along the magazine section with a collecting tin.
>
> (11 April 1990)

DOUG BARBOUR,
11655-72 Avenue, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada T6G 0B9

> Dave Langford does the connected-review column as well as anyone I've read. I note that he manages to maintain a wit most of us poor reviewers seldom attain. His superbly funny putdown of Asimov's *Prelude to Foundation* is both meaner and, it feels to me, more correct than the comments of Colin Steele later in the issue.
>
> I note that Langford, along with Chauvin, disagrees with you about John Crowley's *Little, Big*. As do I, in that I have thoroughly enjoyed the novel both times I've read it, and was not bothered by the moral problems you found in it. But, as a letter just sent to *ASFR* indicates, I tend to forgive writers a lot if they write well, and I think Crowley writes very well indeed. Give me style any time, and I'll enjoy it.
>
> (29 May 1990)

Um. Maybe it's the *style* of *Little, Big* I don't like. It's very different from that of a few other Crowley novels I've sampled. The style in *Little, Big* is very self-congratulatory. I felt like kicking all the characters in the kneecaps, just to upset their cosy little assumptions.

BUCK COULSON,
2677W-500N, Hartford City, Indiana 47348, USA

> I generally don't read horror novels, but Dave Langford's *Guts!* sounds quite interesting. Assuming it ever gets published, of course.
>
> I agree that *Still River* is a long way from Hal Clement's best book, but I did get all the way through it. Of course, I don't object to fantasy as long it isn't in trilogies or longer series, and I object to those in science fiction as well. (For Judith Tarr, I'll make an exception even for trilogies, but I try not do it for anyone else.) Since I am debarred by my publisher from doing killer reviews – which is a great trial to me, as I'm sure you suspected anyway – I fail to finish a lot of both science fiction and fantasy. And fail to begin even more.
>
> Dave Lake says that *Odd John* isn't sentimental. But then it really isn't a novel about a superman, either; it's a novel about a twit with super powers. The entire problem with novels about supermen is that the author has to describe a character who is mentally and physically superior to the author. Nobody has done it well; *More than Human* is better than most. Poul Anderson ducked the problem in *Brain Wave* by writing about a former subnormal man who is still subnormal but whose intelligence has been raised to today's standard.
>
> Robert E. Lee and his doomed campaign is *not* a 'great American myth'. It's a great myth of the American South, which is not at all the same thing. It influences American literature because a lot of the best-known American writers are southerners, but I'd be surprised if over 15 per cent of the US public could tell you who Lee was. (Of course, the US public has trouble with Lincoln, too, so I might be stacking the deck in my favour. But a lot more Americans would recognize Lincoln's name.) Juanita mentioned years ago that sometimes the best writing comes from the areas with fewer material benefits; the great Scandinavian writers are Norwegians, not Swedes, and so on.
>
> I've never heard of the movies Hal Hall mentions, either, but then I don't see all that many movies. I have enjoyed, on tape, *The Man from Snowy River* and *Gallipoli*, and actually went to a theatre for *Crocodile Dundee* and *Breaker Morant*.
>
> (1 April 1990)

To name four Australian movies I haven't seen. The two recent Australian movies I've seen and can recommend are *Malcolm* and *The Big Steal*, both directed by Nadia Tass and written by David Parker. A few years ago, Elaine and I enjoyed the humorous and horrifying *Cane Toads*, about the actual invasion of northern Australia by Queensland cane toads during the last fifty years.

SYNOPSIS: 'Critical Hits' is a regular page of brief reviews which I've been writing for a British games magazine *GM*. Mighty Bruce Gillespie requested the full text to date, and ran his own selection from columns 1 to 12 in the last *SF Commentary*, which was very nice of him. What follows should be his selection from Columns 13 to 18. As I write, *GM* is about to change publishers and/or editors, and might even die altogether. Will there be another column, or will Langford be able to dump all the incoming review books on the compost heap and find true happiness? Stay tuned. [April 1990]

CRITICAL HITS

by Dave Langford

Greasy stockpot . . . and genuine ambition

I promised to report on certain mighty block-busters, beginning with Tad Williams's *The Dragonbone Chair* (Legend, 654 pp., £14.95), which is of course but the first volume of a presumable trilogy.

One can see that the road will be long and arduous; to add to the challenge, obstacles have been set in our path. The publishers do their bit with shrill quotations from uncritical reviews in *Locus* ('The fantasy equivalent of *War and Peace*', a judgment doubtless based on micrometer measurements of thickness) and *Xignals* (a US publisher's house magazine that exists only to puff its own books).

Then the author tells us that this is book one of 'Memory, Sorrow and Thorn' . . . which looks irritatingly like a semantic selection error and begs for parody: 'Rage, Despair and Fungus'. (In Chapter 34 the names finally turn out to be those of magic swords that the good guys must collect at the sedate rate of one per fat book.) Next comes an off-putting 'Author's Warning' which can readily be decoded as saying, 'This may seem full of terrible fantasy cliches, but it's much more original than it looks, honest!'

Fear not, there is no dangerous originality here. This is a long, soothing dip into the warm and greasy stockpot of post-Tolkien fantasy, larded with Prophetic Dreams, Interminable Journeys (on foot, and studded with Regular Peril), a Dark Lord (distinguished from Sauron largely by having two Red Eyes and not just one), Evil Henchmen (distinguished from Nazgul by numbering five rather than nine), Magical History (innovatively revealed in the thirty-second rather than the second chapter) and Familiar Situations.

It reads quite well, although the Council and Siege stuff beginning around Chapter 32 contains too many wince-making echoes of Tolkien's plotting and phraseology; and I boggle at the race of Sithi (i.e. Sidhe or sodding elves) using vast furnaces and foundries to forge *wood*; and readers aware that trolls are big, vicious heavies will be disconcertingly wrong-footed by Williams's contention that trolls are child-sized, humanoid, resourceful and cute (it's a wonder they're not called h*bb*ts).

I appreciate the efforts to work up a credible political situation, and rather enjoyed some of the descriptive set-pieces (like one castle's gormenghastly cellar-labyrinth). Ultimately, though, the history and mythology lack deep roots. A high level of inventiveness is not required to make up months like Novander and Decander, or weekdays like Drorsday (as a hint we're also told about Dror's Hammer).

In short, while not contemptible, this is a product rooted in the thin, depleted soil of all too much commercial fantasy. So what's new? It's big, undemanding, reasonably literate, and will occupy a long train journey without imposing the hideous mental strain of coping with actual innovations.

Freshness also depends on the narrative slant. Fay Sampson in *Wise Woman's Telling* (Headline, 229 pp., £2.99) has a go at the worn old Arthurian legend, but injects new life – first by having the story told by a garrulous minor character, the wise woman and midwife who delivers Arthur and his half-sisters, and second by making Morgan (le Fay) the focus of interest.

The undercurrent of paganism has a grim and messy conviction about it, and likewise the Dark Ages brutality. The extent to which magic 'works' is left hazy, allowing this to be marketed as Historical Fiction. By the end, young Morgan is already warped: an ugly duckling with a beautiful mother and sisters, neglected by a father and then a step-father (Uther Pendragon) only concerned with male heirs.

We know tragedy must follow. After Malory's and T. H. White's pictures of Morgan as a conventional villainess, it's a change to see something of her viewpoint. If she comes convincingly through puberty and sorcerous initiation in the forthcoming *White Nun's Telling*, this will be a series to watch.

Chung Kuo: The Middle Kingdom by David Wingrove (NEL, 501 pp., £7.95) is another one to get compared with *War and Peace* – the finished series, gasp the awestruck publicists, will be four

times as long. Well, yes, and Dave Langford is *much taller* than William Shakespeare. . . .

This is a genuinely ambitious future history, an sf political thriller set 200 years hence in a world run by the Han (Chinese), who have rewritten the past to eliminate Western culture. Officially, a lid has been jammed down on technological change; unofficially, the Caucasian subject peoples are boiling with new inventions in genetics, space flight, etc. The world's hive-cities are filling up, and something will have to go pop.

Initially the book is a shade off-putting, with its portentous epigraphs, welter of similar-seeming Chinese names, choppy narrative (Wingrove likes fragmented sentences. Likes them a lot. Especially for melodramatic bits. Especially then.) and flaunted research work. Unrolling an edict, a character explains, 'These are their seals. The *Ywe Lung*, symbol of their power. . . .' This helpful translation is not the sort of thing you say when showing someone his death warrant.

Nevertheless the story develops into quite a page-turner, thick with plots and assassinations. The sf themes work reasonably well with the politics, my chief cavil being that when you have 36 billion mouths to feed, you surely grow mushrooms in your world city's basement rather than leave it 'wild' for tribes of degenerate trogs (cf. Brian Stableford's *The Face of Heaven*).

Wingrove rather cunningly works against our prejudices by giving the Han rulers far more dignity than the beastly opposition: the 'Western' faction leaders are, almost without exception, nasty pieces of work. There is lots of skippable blood and violence to help establish this point.

At the close of this first book, nothing is resolved; loose threads proliferate; two characters who will be major shapers of the plot (according to publicity sheets) are still brain-damaged kids. One can't prejudge a seven-book sequence, but although I think Tolstoy's position in literature is relatively safe, *Chung Kuo* could well grow into something worthwhile.

For light relief, try Tom Holt's *Who's Afraid of Beowulf?* (Orbit, 206 pp., £3.99), which isn't a sequel to his Wagnerian farce *Expecting Someone Taller*, but a similarly daft treatment of epic strife between revenant Vikings, sorcerer-kings, BBC film crews, the London Underground and the National Grid. It made me chuckle a lot, if not quite as much as Holt's first book. For games fans there's the added challenge of working out the rules of Goblin's Teeth, as played by two chthonic elementals throughout the book. 'Four . . . Double Rune Score. I think I'll have another longhouse on Upsala.'

These days, short sf/fantasy stories are rarer than novels, but there are still enough to fill two hefty Best of 1988 collections with minimal duplication (two pieces). Gardner Dozois's American selection is the fat *Best New SF 3* (Robinson, 596 pp., £6.99); for Britain, David S. Garnett offers *The Orbit Science Fiction Yearbook* (Orbit, 347 pp., £4.99).

Much though I love and accept large glasses of beer from Garnett, Dozois wins on several counts. Size: 28 rather than 12 stories, and many more words for your money (larger pages, smaller type). Chauvinism: three rather than zero British items. Acclaim: nine Hugo-shortlisted stories (including my favourites, Eileen Gunn's 'Stable Strategies for Middle Management' and Lucius Shepard's 'The Scalehunter's Beautiful Daughter', the latter probably too long for the Orbit book) rather than only one.

Still, both collections are worth your money. And Garnett's contains bizarre extras, notably Brian Aldiss's farewell to the late Salvador Dali (and his ocelot), and the editor's own caustic look at the year in sf, by comparison with which I am a starry-eyed optimist brimming with uncritical love for everything, even Piers Anthony.

Page-turners versus slow reads

Last month I sounded breathless; *GM* had maliciously been rearranging its copy dates, and while you lot could recover for a leisurely month between my last two columns, I only had a week from one deadline to the next.

Herewith some afterthoughts on a phrase used then: 'quite a page-turner'. This sounds great, as though the book is of such stupefying brilliance that it grabs you by the scruff of the neck and forces you to page through at compulsive speed. Conversely, 'a slow read' doesn't sound very exciting, does it?

In terms of quality and durability, it can often be the other way around. A 'country ramble' novel that tempts you to read slowly and relish every page might well score over a 'motorway' book which goes fast because it offers nothing to detain you anywhere – where the only thing to do is zoom on through featureless prose to the next major plot intersection.

A good uncontroversial example of storytelling that works at either speed is the Ursula Le Guin *Earthsea* trilogy (reissued by Gollancz at £9.95 per book, an Xmas present I wish I'd had way back). There's plenty of plot to gobble down, but sentence by sentence the writing offers enjoyment no matter how slowly you wander through.

Conversely, my vague unease about that 'page-turner' *Chung Kuo: The Middle Kingdom* (last issue) came into focus when I realized it's a motorway full of potholes. The leaden and undistinguished prose persuades you to scan it at increasing speed, whereupon you keep running into bumpy details which require more attention, and momentum is once again lost. Stop, start, stop, start . . . very exhausting.

Much more fun is *The Player of Games* by Iain M. Banks (Orbit, 309 pp., £4.99), an unashamed space opera whose easy style and control of pace looks effortless until compared with the opposition; it's a Rolls-Royce journey through Disneyland.

This is set in the universe of *Consider Phlebas*, whose grand space- operatic gestures didn't quite fit the claustrophobic finale and the doomed protagonist who all along was fighting on the wrong side. *Player* is much sunnier in its depiction of the right side, the Culture, a galactic society of unlimited energy which, unlike most sf utopias, sounds huge fun to live in. In it lives super-game-

player Jernau Morat Gurgeh (for short: Banks has a weakness for ludicrous names, and I'll spare you the rest).

Gurgeh is lured (by an obvious set-up) into a journey beyond the Culture to play in the horrible Azad Empire, whose structure is mirrored in their vastly complex game of azad. Thanks to this one-to-one mapping, everything Banks writes about the Empire is information about azad, and vice versa: an intricate system of dog-eat-dog viciousness, surpassing even the legendary horrors of the City of London in the barbaric era of Thatcher.

Goaded and abetted by highly engaging and/or maddening machine intelligences, Gurgeh must claw his way to the top of the Empire game and challenge the ruler himself in a deadly playoff on the lethal Planet of Fire, etc. Killer gambits are not confined to the gameboard, and great wads of cards bulge in every visible sleeve. Yes, it's *that* plot, and I've never seen it so enjoyably done.

Man in His Time (VGSF, 328 pp., £3.50) is Brian Aldiss's *Best SF Stories* (1988) with a new title and introduction, perhaps to distinguish it from two previous 'Best Aldiss SF' collections (some swine suggested it should be called *Third Best SF Of . . .*). The new *A Romance of the Equator* (Gollancz, 345 pp., £13.95) assembles his best fantasies, with an introduction that mildly deplores this fantasy/sf pigeonholing and threatens a further volume, *Best Nondescript Stories*. Both collections are superlatively good; I liked the fantasies better only because more of them were new to me.

Entirely new to me is Rosaleen Love, whose collection *The Total Devotion Machine* (Women's Press, 167 pp., £4.50) is full of fun and irony, sometimes very black, always sharply pointed. Certain readers seem to think Women's Press books are all boring rants about the evils of men; this one is more typical in being wittily acid about both sexes. . . . Highly recommended.

Douglas Hill's *The Fraxilly Fracas* (Gollancz, 220 pp., £11.95; simultaneous paperback) is billed as the first *adult* sf by this popular children's writer. You could have fooled me. It's a simple-minded adventure, the sort of thing that Harry Harrison sometimes (by no means always) manages to make work by sheer energy.

Interstellar courier Del Curb, a diluted and substantially more stupid avatar of the Stainless Steel Rat, fumbles through a plot that announces its proud escape from the children's list by including discreet s*x scenes, drooling mentions of women's br**sts, and real grown-up sneers at poofdahs. Oh, and it concludes with a tiresomely protracted battle in which lots of spear-carriers get mown down with blasters.

The best thing about this is the good it does the reader's self-esteem. Like a superbeing filled to the gills with the magic drug that is the story's Macguffin, you find yourself eerily able to predict plot turns forty pages in advance, and increasingly snappish when (as always) they come as a total surprise to Curb. If it weren't for the naughty bits and some rather anaemic violence, this would be strictly for the kids.

I popped into last week's *GM* pub meeting, and Alan Crump felled me to the ground with cries of, 'You bastard, you reviewed *Who's Afraid of Beowulf*: I'd already done it in issue 9.' Spitting out teeth, I explained that my review was (a) justified by the new paperback edition, and (b) much better than his. When I recovered consciousness, a passing reader suggested that hardback reviews should include a note of when the affordable version would appear. If only publishers would tell us. Expect a minimum one-year lag.

Some recommended reissues: *Cloudrock* (Unwin, 160 pp., £3.50) and *Abandonati* (Unwin, 162 pp., £3.99) by Garry Kilworth. *On Stranger Tides* by Tim Powers (Grafton, 397 pp., £3.99). *Durdane* by Jack Vance (VGSF, 617 pp., £3.99) – a fizzled-out trilogy worth it for the first book *The Faceless Man* alias *The Anome*.

Deryni Rising by Katherine Kurtz (Legend, 271 pp., £3.50) is the first in that popular yet oddly lacklustre fantasy series. Why lacklustre? Ursula Le Guin explains, in *The Language of the Night: Essays on Fantasy and SF* (Women's Press, 210 pp., £5.95). This includes her classic essay 'From Elfland to Poughkeepsie', bashing Kurtz and others who take the wine-flask of high fantasy and fill it with stale stylistic Pepsi. Most of the book is essential reading, though Le Guin can lapse into a sort of annoying Zen impenetrability which seems more like pose than communication.

Finding my wife laughing uncontrollably over a novel, I wondered if some new rival to T. Pratchett had appeared. But, drying her tears of mirth, she warned that you do need an Egyptology degree to appreciate all the wondrous unintentional humour of Anne Rice's *The Mummy, or Ramses the Damned* (Chatto & Windus, 436 pp., £12.95), starring a revived mummy who unlike other ancient Egyptians is a tall, blue-eyed, wavy-haired hunk. Mummies, who can figure 'em?

To end the year, there's always another Tolkien calendar (Unwin). The 1990 illustrator is Ted Nasmith, whose landscapes look spiffy but resemble Canada (where he lives), not Tolkien's English vision. The hobbits are averagely cute (but pointed *ears*?), Gollum wisely shirked, Treebeard unwisely attempted, Legolas camp beyond belief; Aragorn's 'travel-stained' threads are clearly fresh from the laundry. The Nazgul, nobbled at the Ford, have visible skull-faces and hands (shome mishtake surely), while in the background Glorfindel is blatantly ignoring the carnage to pose with his best profile forward. Ho hum.

Various magics, some spellbinding

Some review books are shiftily put on the When I Get Around To It pile (sometimes known as the Oxfam Stack or the Trilogies' Graveyard); others are snatched from their wrappings and eagerly gobbled even when I should be doing something else. Yes, I know, this is fearful prejudice and discrimination. Please don't tell publishers.

Anything by Jonathan Carroll comes into the second category, and here is *A Child Across the Sky* (Legend, 268 pp., £11.95), in similar vein to his

Bones of the Moon and *Sleeping in Flame*. The Carroll 'formula' involves colourful people with warm relationships and lovable eccentricities (sometimes reminiscent of Theodore Sturgeon), usually living in or visiting Vienna (where Carroll lives), their over-egged brightness and warmth contrasting powerfully with the supernatural darkness or insanity that seeps from outside.

Child makes unconventional use of familiar horror props: the imaginary companion, the angel of death, fears of pregnancy and cancer, and horror movies themselves. It addresses the big question of whether gut-wrenching horror can really be art, to which George Orwell replied that certain works might simultaneously be brilliant creations and worthy of being burned by the public hangman. Carroll's convoluted response is both shocking and ambiguous.

Though I could have done without the cross-references to his last two books, this is compulsive reading, and unlike anything else around.

If anyone wants an immensely complex and consistently daft magical system for some RPG game, astrology might fill the bill – not so much the superficial nonsense in newspaper horoscopes as the esoteric, in-depth nonsense that lies behind. *Astrology: True or False?* by Roger Culver and Philip Ianna (Prometheus, 228 pp., £10.45) is a semi-technical look through scientists' eyes at the roots of the alleged 'oldest science'.

And?

The intellectual underpinnings of astrology would appear to be shabbier than even I'd believed. There's no testable theory of why it should work, let alone proof that it does; no explanation of why Uranus, Neptune and Pluto never disturbed the calculations of astrologers before their discovery, as they did those of mere astronomers; no justification of significant angles like the trine (120 degrees) other than numerological neatness; no consensus, even, about the zodiac, its constellations (e.g. the simple, observable facts that there are more than twelve and some are bigger than others) or the 'Age of Aquarius' (beginning in 1781, 2740, or somewhere between).

However, astrology is testably and verifiably a great money-spinner, and one must deplore this book's scurvy attempt to persuade the gullible not to invest in worthless predictions. Even charlatans have to live.

Cradle by Arthur C. Clarke and Gentry Lee (Orbit, 373 pp., £6.99) is, despite the price, a paperback reissue. This oversized 'C-format' is supposed to be prestigious; nice for authors but a pest when you have to wait another year for an affordable paperback (I reviewed the hardback aeons ago, in my final *Dwarf* column).

Not to worry: *Cradle* is a shatteringly disappointing sf novel, well worth missing. The Clarke flavour is faintly detectable, but only in the sense that a reconstituted freeze-dried curry might fleetingly remind you of real tandoori cuisine. How did this literary fast-food merchant Gentry get hold of the ageing but respected Clarke fiction franchise?

In *The Treason of Isengard* (Unwin Hyman, 504 pp., £17.95), the even more aged – indeed, dead – J.R.R.Tolkien stirs again into a ghastly semblance of life and shambles gruesomely towards the bookstands, under the cruel compulsion of his merciless necromancer son.

Yes, Christopher 'Reanimator' Tolkien has once more dabbled in forbidden first drafts with which Man was not meant to meddle. After extensive backtracking he continues and laboriously annotates the early *Lord of the Rings*, from Moria to Theoden's hall. Crushed by the numbing weight of seven such volumes (to date), deafened by the eldritch cries of academic thesis-mongers, sanity crumbles and one acknowledges that *someone* must think this vast prose mausoleum worthwhile. That is not dead which can eternal lie; they'll look nice on anyone's shelf, imposing, scholarly and unread.

Amongst the living, Keith Roberts is conceivably Britain's finest sf/fantasy author – when he's on form. So often, he isn't. The seven stories in *Winterwood and other hauntings* (Morrigan, 182 pp., £13.95) mostly radiate the magic of his best stuff: mythic places, evil buildings, homicidal cars and utterly believable people. In addition, Roberts illustrates his own tales well, and appears as a lurking apparition in the jacket photo. Collectors take note.

Ian Williams's *The Lies That Bind* (Frontlines, 255 pp., £2.50) is rebellious 'young adult' sf examining standard wish-fulfilment fantasy in a relentless moral light. Here the main characters are gifted teenagers at a special school, firmly set in Thatcherite Britain, where paranormal talents are machined for State use.

There are dollops of sarcasm about comics superheroes' overblown powers and melodramatic agonies. People in *Lies* have low-budget abilities and tend to enjoy life without realizing the push to make them dependent on the school, incapable of relationships outside. The hero is a quiet rebel who's prepared to sacrifice everything (more indeed than logically necessary – the dice are loaded for dramatic effect) to be himself.

Quibbles: a few redolent purple patches and some vagueness about talent limitations (the psychic weight-lifting record is under 18 pounds, yet some people levitate themselves; the top pyrotic can ignite 'at most' twelve sheets of paper, but how often, and mightn't one corner of one sheet suffice?). Acceptable dialogue and interesting people, though, and a strong if excessively Worthy message about keeping your integrity even when the System can't be beaten.

The Gollancz SF Classics series has been beset by the problem that so many 'real' classics are contracted to other publishers (whether in print or not). Recent selections are Brian Aldiss's early and erratically brilliant collection *Galaxies Like Grains of Sand* (VGSF, 188 pp., £2.99) and – the first genuine surprise for some while – William Tenn's 1968 *Of Men and Monsters* (VGSF, 251 pp., £2.99).

Tenn has a refreshingly cynical view of our place in the universe. Here, invading aliens have offhandedly swatted down human civilization, leaving its remnants scurrying like mice in the wainscot. Traditional sf solutions would see the invaders bluffed into retreat, won over as allies, or defeated by *deus ex machina*. Without being gloomy, Tenn is infinitely more realistic; and as humanity's glorious

new future opens out, you can imagine his nasty smile.

(Erudition Dept: I suspect the short 1963 version of this one was heavily influenced by Pohl's and Kornbluth's *Wolfbane*, and in turn influenced John Brunner's inferior *Age of Miracles*.)

The King in Yellow by Robert W. Chambers (Dedalus, 253 pp., £4.95) is a reputed classic from 1895, praised and pillaged by H. P. Lovecraft, and the source of certain Cthulhu Mythos catchwords. Four portentous stories are linked by the sinister playscript *The King in Yellow*, no healthier for bedtime reading than the abhorred *Necronomicon* itself: 'The author shot himself after bringing forth this monstrosity, didn't he?' Few horror pundits mention that the other six tales are unrelated, non-supernatural romances.

'What a beautiful night. . . . If only we didn't have to worry about giant crabs!' 'Every so often he felt the striking claws missing him by inches.' 'There's a colossal crab which leads them. I've named him King Crab.' 'The big crab shambled forward. . . . His revolting features appeared to crease into a lusting grin.' 'The giant crabs had grossly mistimed their attack on the Blue Ocean Holiday Camp.' 'The crabs were spoiling everybody's holiday.' . . .

Guy N. Smith's *Night of the Crabs* and *Crabs' Moon* (both Grafton, £2.99) are, it says here, classic horror bestsellers. Maybe it's a misprint for humour. Next issue, I promise lashings of even worse quotations from worse writers. Cancel your subscription now.

The column you get when I'm away in America

The *Bloom County* strip features one of my favourite reviews: Opus the penguin tackling a film which 'has brought the word "bad" to new levels of badness.' He continues: 'Bad acting. Bad effects. Bad everything. This bad film just oozed rottenness from every bad scene. . . . Simply bad beyond all infinite dimensions of possible badness.'

Long pause. 'Well maybe not that bad, but Lord, it wasn't good.'

Quite. This month we travel back through time, through ultimate dimensions of possible badness in sf, more bad even than L. Ron Hubbard, if such is feasible. . . .

(In case you're wondering, this lapse from reviewing new stuff is to cover my month's absence as guest at an American sf convention. Better, I hope, than just a line saying 'Langford is on holiday'.)

Some say the acme of badness appears in *The Troglodytes* (Digit, 19??) by Nal Rafcam, whose very name looks vaguely backwards. 'Rafcam' was evidently (a) uneasy with the English language, but (b) in possession of an extensive thesaurus. Hence these examples of sf as she is spoke:

'If we are underground at any depth the rock up there must be as hard as carbon.'

'On earth the ecumenical collapse of world cities drew the attention of the public eye to terra firma. The period of strife and universal privation was malingering.'

'Kurt Semen had repeatedly been jailed for disturbing the peace and inciting unnecessary pathos.' (A vile offence, agreed.)

'The echoing of the lesser explosion left the commandos effete.'

'You can probably see that they have to wear camouflage against the strong daylight.'

'No human could have endured the intense heat, let alone super-humans.'

'Everything was cinerated. Every living person was killed the moment the deadly emissions from the tribe's machinery pierced through the camp's superficial structure. So instantaneous and final were these lethal rays that the destructive act was over in but a few minutes.'

Alexander Thynn (Lord Weymouth) failed to electrify the sf field with his privately published *The King is Dead* (1976), promising a 'new concept for religion' explained by super-evolved intelligences whom it's unusually difficult to take seriously:

'I suppose you might liken us to huge steaming lumps of purple jelly, anchored to metallic plates which are embedded within rubberized constructions of great architectural beauty. . . . And we emit a soft, musical blurping sound for the purposes of communication.'

Some classic pulp lines have such panache as to be almost good: a favourite appears in David Duncan's *Occam's Razor* (1957). 'Gentlemen, we are about to short-circuit the universe!'

'The gripping grab of its gravity waves tugged at our guts,' adds the euphonious Frederik Pohl (*Gateway*, 1977).

Robert Heinlein, after a distinguished sf career, went ape in his final years and produced some thrill-a-second feminist material, as in *The Number of the Beast*:

'I'd be an idiot to risk competing with Deety's teats.'

'Our teeth grated and my nipples went *spung!*'

'Her face remained calm but the light went out – and her nipples went down.'

'My darling keeps her feelings out of her face, mostly, but those pretty pink spigots are barometers of her morale.'

In *The Shores of Space* (1957), Richard Matheson of *I Am Legend* fame manages to create an inadvertently furry lady: 'Across her face, the hot wind fanned bluntly, ruffling the short blond hair.'

Not to mention the most versatile eyebrows in fiction: 'He blinked away the waves of blackness lapping at his ankles.'

The happily forgotten *Starship Through Space* by Lee Correy (1954) is an awful warning to writers who proudly quote their own poetry. 'We who have tasted alien stream / And done what others only dream; / We who with earth-dirt on our shoes / Have walked the paths the sunbeams use; / We will trod the Milky Way.'

Silas Waters's *The Man with Absolute Motion* (1955) took a crack at scientists' fuddy-duddy ideas about absolute zero at –273 degrees: 'We can produce temperatures of minus 900 degrees Kelvin.'

And the same book's aliens have a rare command of invective. '"You make me ill!" Volmik said harshly and uttered the most insulting statement known to Alphirkians: "You make my guts tired."'

Characters in *Whirlpool of Stars* by 'Tully Zetford' (Kenneth Bulmer; 1974), besides moving 'with the speed of a striking sex-crazed strooka', are more outspoken still. . . .

'You great gonil!'

'Goddamned terrestrial plug-ugly curd of a bastard!'

'Blasted womb-regurgitant Lerdun government!'

'What a gang of Charlies!'

'I've said you're a chancroid, Hook, and a burst ulcer, and a candidate for advanced pustular syphiloderma, and I'll go on telling you you're a Pasteurella pestis —'

(This basic vocabulary is rearranged into many further interesting remarks and ejaculations.)

How do voluminous writers keep it up for book after remorseless book? John Norman demonstrates in *Time Slave* (1975), as a subtly characterized woman first meets a *GM* editor:

'She looked upon him. Never before in her life had she seen such a male. He made even Gunther seem a lesser man. Her imagination had not even dreamed that such a man could exist. The men she had known earlier, even Gunther, had been no intimation that there might be males such as these. Such men, she thought, could not exist in her time. In her time there was no place; there could be no place, for such men as these.'

Robert Lionel Fanthorpe, man of a thousand pseudonyms, cheerily admits the awfulness of his countless sf potboilers for the long-departed (and unmourned) Badger Books. These are now cult novels, since Fanthorpe was bright enough for his pittance-crazed free association into the dictaphone to be awful in startling ways.

Here he flaunts his greatest talent, padding (*Neuron World*, 1965): 'Never, not even in the deepest natural darkness that she had ever experienced, had she encountered an absence of light as total as this. It was unutterably dark, this was the Stygian darkness of which poets wrote. This was the pit of Acheron of which the creators of classic prose made mention. This was a kind of darkness that made thick, black velvet seem like chiffon by contrast. This was the kind of darkness that turned pitch into translucent polythene, when the two were placed side by side. This was the kind of darkness that made the wings of the raven resemble the pinions of the dove. . . .'

Here are the prose rhythms which compel audiences to chant along (*March of the Robots*, 1961): 'The city slept. Men slept. Women slept. Children slept. Dogs and cats slept.'

Here, plagiarizing *The Tempest*, he adapts Gonzalo's 'born to be hanged, not drowned' speech (*Beyond The Void*, 1965): 'I still think he'll make the devitalizing chamber, though every cubic foot of space tends to argue otherwise, and the whole of the void opens its great maw to swallow him.'

And here's his thesaurus at full throttle (*Galaxy 666*, 1963): 'Our universe is straightforward; this one is whimsical, fanciful and fantastic. This is a temperamental galaxy, an hysterical galaxy, a mad galaxy. This is an insane, freakish, wanton, erratic, inconsistent galaxy; it's a completely unreasonable galaxy. It's undisciplined, refractory, uncertain and unpredictable. It's a volatile galaxy, a mercurial galaxy.... It's a frivolous galaxy; it's inconsistent and inconstant; it's variable; it's unstable; it's irresponsible and unreliable.' (At which point, and not before time, the speaker falls over.)

For further coruscating drivel, seek out Neil Gaiman's and Kim Newman's quotebook *Ghastly Beyond Belief* (Arrow, 1985). A final, extremely posthumous credit goes to poet William McGonagall for his celebration of the print technology which makes *GM* possible: 'And when Life's prospects may at times appear dreary to ye, / Remember Alois Senefelder, the discoverer of lithography.'

The books that were waiting when I returned from America

Out of the void and the darkness that is peopled by Mimir's brood, from the ultimate silent fastness of the desolate deep-sea gloom (small prize offered to the first reader identifying the quote), I'm back from my American convention trip. One day the world may be ready to learn why at the end of my speech about sf excesses, Greg Bear stalked up and hissed, 'I'll talk to you later. . . .'

Belatedly, my 1989 Naff Award goes to the publications of Barry R. Levin, Californian purveyor of very expensive sf 'collectables'. In November, Levin was gloating over, and asking $6500 for, a special first edition of *The Satanic Verses* signed by Salmon Rushdie, bound in goatskin, printed on vellum — and with the tipped-in autograph of the Ayatollah Khomeini. One can only retch.

Then Levin announced his 1989 'Collectors Awards'. Rushdie was honoured as 'Most Collectable Author of the Year', which I'm sure consoled him no end. 'Most Collectable Book' was Stephen King's *My Pretty Pony*: I remember this as a $2000 limited-edition short story bound into a brushed metal case with, mounted on the front, a small, cheap-looking digital clock. Funny people, collectors.

Onward, hastily, to some real books. Gollancz steams ahead despite its takeover by the American outfit Houghton Mifflin, and as always there's another Terry Pratchett or six: the latest is *Guards! Guards!* (Gollancz, 288 pp., £12.95), of which I'll only say that it's very funny indeed despite — no, in part *because of* the contrast between high daftness and several characters' deserved annihilation in the white-hot flame of the least cute dragon seen for many a trilogy. It is also a Discworld police procedural novel, a send-up of secret cults ('The Door of Knowledge Through Which the Untutored May Not Pass sticks something wicked in the damp'), and generally irresistible.

Speaking of secret cults, Umberto Eco followed up *The Name of the Rose* with the equally erudite though less gripping *Foucault's Pendulum* (Secker & Warburg, 641 pp., £14.95), a novel about modern

perversions and distortions of 'occult' matters from mediaeval times onward.

This is crammed with bizarre factoids and makes it amusingly clear that you can lash up a explanation of everything from any material whatever. At one point someone feeds his computer a random set of inputs (starting with 'The Templars have something to do with everything') and gets out a persuasive and totally rubbishy theory which to his disgust turns out to have already been published, as *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail*.

Even false theories, though, can bring disaster. Eco's nasty climax reminds me of a key insight in John Crowley's rather better book *Aegypt*: 'secret societies have *not* had power in history, but the *notion* that secret societies had power in history *has* had power in history. . . .' *Pendulum* has its esoteric fascination but moves sluggishly, bloated with too much pseudo-arcane lore.

In *The Fugitive Worlds* (Gollancz, 254 pp., £12.95), Bob Shaw closes his trilogy about the double planets Land and Overland by telling a fourth independent story (the middle book had two). Unifying the sequence by its setting and partial overlap of characters, Shaw avoids the dread and all too common pitfall of an overstretched plot with a central plateau of padding.

This time it's a rattling yarn of (more) visiting aliens, who need the Land/Overland system as a shipyard for a bizarre thingy based on – and desperately needed because of – the unimaginable violence of this alien universe's physics. Will anyone escape the galaxy-wide cataclysm? Will Land be destroyed? Or Overland? Or both? Will the hero find true love, and will the value of *pi* ever become a sensible 3.14159? You'll enjoy finding out: it's not deep but (even if, in Roz Kaveney's words, the yarn rattles because it isn't too well screwed together) it's fun. The final twist might or might not herald a fourth book.

Harry Harrison's 1965 *Bill, the Galactic Hero* was sharp, satirical and funny. I report this with relief, having just reread it . . . owing to a sudden ghastly feeling that it might have been a dull, shambolic mass of flabby slapstick, blunt-edged parody and general embarrassment, like his new *Bill, the Galactic Hero on the Planet of Robot Slaves* (Gollancz, 236 pp., £11.95). This features much-repeated jokes such as a planet's being innovatively called Usa so that alien artefacts can be hilariously labelled, in English, MADE IN USA. Which is about as side-splitting as it ever gets. No wonder Harrison is now subletting the series to other writers.

Proteus Unbound by Charles Sheffield (NEL, 267pp, £2.99) is in the 'hard sf' tradition, complete with PhD and rivets. I liked the engineering and kept raising sceptical eyebrows at the psychology. Would you fancy living in space 30 metres from a lethally radiating black hole, merely for the convenience of its tiny gravity? Myself, I'd prefer the relative safety of a penthouse atop Sellafield, but this book's characters don't seem bothered.

They have other worries, like the biosoftware flaws that keep turning people into giant newts (worse, giant *dead* newts), or the arch-villain's unsociable habit of driving potential enemies insane by beaming them pictures of himself dancing backwards in red tights. It takes all sorts. Read this for a modicum of suspense and ingeniously worked-out technology, not for actual narrative conviction. . . .

Introducing his collection *Tales from Planet Earth* (Legend, 313 pp., £12.95), Arthur C. Clarke confirms that he's retired from writing short fiction. Apart from one bit of piffle and two solid stories in his best manner, all dated 1987, this is a ragbag of items from other collections, superseded drafts (like the short version of *The Deep Range*) and oddments not previously thought substantial enough for an anthology.

Nevertheless, I suppose it's good to have the material gathered here – a capstone for completists, an introduction for lucky new readers, and a gentle reminder of the haunting effects which, when not collaborating with the awful Gentry Lee, Clarke can still achieve.

Michael Moorcock's *Casablanca* (Gollancz, 267 pp., £13.95) is an even odder mix, with strong stories, evocative stories, and elegantly opaque stories with bloody Jerry Cornelius cavorting with everyone from Ladbroke Grove to the end of time. One of these is a heavy revision of 'The Great Rock 'n' Roll Swindle' (allegedly about the Sex Pistols), which became a rarity when the original tabloid-newspaper publication fell inexorably to dust.

Some bits of journalism are included, but not really enough: unless colossally brilliant, brief book reviews and political comments are best served in some bulk, not laid out like *nouvelle cuisine* in big print with wide margins. Worth reading, though: Moorcock's heart is usually in the right place.

But I'm uneasy about his keenness on anti-porn legislation, and not only because he rather blurs the distinction between soft and hard stuff. Historically, every legal weapon forged to attack exploitative filth has before long been misused against writing which merely offends the self-appointed guardians of our sexual and political purity.

It's a dilemma for a wishy-washy liberal like myself. Good old Moorcock warns us in the name of feminism that porn is responsible for all manner of evils done to women. Yet many informed feminists disagree, like Gayle Rubin: 'Gender inequality and contemptuous attitudes toward women are endemic to this society and are consequently reflected in virtually all our media, including advertising and pornography. They do not originate in pornography and migrate from there into the rest of popular culture.'

So, do appalling sexist covers appear on magazines (no names, now) because the editors want to corrupt you, or because public buying tastes have corrupted those who have to choose a 'selling' cover? Think about it.

Langford and the jolly UFO

Regular readers may already be able to deduce what I think of Whitley Strieber's UFO abduction claims in his *Communion* and *Transformation*. Since one serious UFO researcher in this country was threatened with a massive lawsuit for express-

ing opinions strangely similar to mine, I have no intention of putting my head on the block next to Salman Rushdie's by recording my views here. You'll just have to guess.

Strieber's new work of fiction is a novel called *Majestic* (Macdonald, 318 pp., £12.95), dramatizing the hoary old tale of alien corpses from a crashed UFO in 1947, which every US Government is supposed to have covered up ever since – you know, just as they so successfully covered up Watergate. Imagine my delight at reading that this is firmly 'based on fact', and that the quoted facts include a detailed synopsis of a story which I know, incontrovertibly, to be pure fiction. I know this because I wrote it myself in 1978.

My spoof UFO book *An Account of a Meeting with Denizens of Another World, 1871* (David & Charles, 1979) has for some years been shamefully out of print. It centres on a most implausibly detailed, articulate and scientifically boggling first-person record of a Victorian 'close encounter', which I understand numerous UFO researchers have enjoyed as merely a pleasant frolic, but which in condensed form now occupies pages 46-7 of *Majestic*.

What can I say? You might well wonder how this author's 'years of research' (blurb) missed the coverage in *New Scientist* and *Skeptical Inquirer* which confirmed my story as fictional . . . and you might even speculate on how many other 'true incidents' rehashed in *Majestic* are equally solidly based on fact.

(There was also a lively correspondence about *An Account* in *Private Eye*, during which Paul Barnett – the editor who commissioned my Victorian extravaganza in the first place – proved to his own satisfaction that not only was the UFO fictional but so was David Langford.)

In the literary world, as you might imagine, it is considered a bit off for a writer to make free with others' original creations in his own fiction, without asking permission or including a printed acknowledgement. I have begun an enjoyable correspondence with Whitley Strieber's British and American publishers. This one will run and run.

As for *Majestic* . . . struggling against mere prejudice, I can heartily recommend pages 46 and 47 but retain a sneaking preference for my original version.

The Arthurian myth is one of the great originals, dominating what used to be called the Matter of England; but its lofty romantic tone, heavy Christianization, and downplaying of women can sometimes get up your nose. This is where Fay Sampson scores, continuing her chronicle of the murky flipside in *White Nun's Telling* (Headline, 245 pp., £3.50).

The infant Arthur stays offstage while his half-sister Morgan grows up in the Dark Ages equivalent of women's prison, a convent at Tintagel. This Christian cult is barely established, though; and the narrator, Morgan's new guardian Luned, is a flawed nun who can't keep her precocious pupil from the Old Religion. Blood, betrayal and damnation. Arthur isn't going to know what hit him. Watch for *Black Smith's Telling* in July.

Some authors rework myths; some produce their own, new-minted. After a series of narrative delaying actions (as though he himself were intimidated by his own creation, and felt it better to travel hopefully than to arrive), Robert Holdstock takes us to the hollow heart of myth in *Lavondyss* (Grafton, 475 pp., £3.99). The fulfilment of this quest doesn't leave the usual saccharine aftertaste of rigged success, but the ache of reality. Holdstock writes the Real Stuff.

So, when you've unravelled his cunning little webs, does Gene Wolfe. *Endangered Species* (Orbit, 506 pp., £4.99) collects three *dozen* of his short stories, the title being no doubt an ironic comment on today's short story market. I've been keeping this as a treat and rationing myself, which is just as well, as a full review would need several thousand words. Even minor Wolfe, of which there's a sufficiency here, requires one to think at least twice. If you don't run to the bookshop when I mention that two of these are pendants to the *Book of the New Sun*, you have no taste and deserve to be force-fed Piers Anthony for the rest of your life.

(I cannot even contemplate *opening* the new Anthony, *Pornucopia*, in which this author's legendary subtlety and finesse are applied to a story of bionic groin attachments, with the hero questing for the Ultimate Dildo of the Cosmos. No, I promise I'm not joking.)

A wave of nostalgia came over me at sight of Barrington Bayley's double bill *The Fall of Chronopolis/Collision with Chronos* (Pan, 399 pp., £3.99). Back in the 70s these novels blew my little undergraduate mind and assured me that there was life after Isaac Asimov. Their actual writing may not be too brilliant (he tactfully understated), but the games with time and infinity still dazzle. Bayley scatters bizarre ideas the way other writers use full stops. There are more in *The Pillars of Eternity/The Garments of Caean* (Pan, 414 pp., £3.99). Feel that heady sensation of your brain splattering against the ceiling. . . .

Speaking of reissues, the Gollancz SF classic series has come full circle with a new edition of its first selection, Kurt Vonnegut's *The Sirens of Titan* (VGSF, 224 pp., £3.50). This nastily funny book, in which the whole of human history becomes a shaggy dog story, is a far cry from the self-indulgent slop like *Breakfast of Champions* with which Vonnegut alienated his sf audience. It really is a classic.

So in a small way is *Downward to the Earth* (VGSF, 190 pp., £3.50), from Robert Silverberg's best period in the 70s: a lush and mystical rite-of-passage story which infuses sf with the exotic flavours of Joseph Conrad.

Owing to misgivings, I've delayed dipping into Games Workshop's books based on, or set in the world of, or generally tainted by, their 'Warhammer' games. Long ago I was invited to contribute, but after reading the sourcebooks I just couldn't. Perhaps the game plays brilliantly, but its literary background is basic junkfood fantasy and desperately derivative. GW made a great fuss about protecting their original, copyrighted settings of Albion, Nippon, Araby, and Cathay, peopled with innovative and no doubt trademarked creatures like orcs, trolls, dwarves, elves, vampires and the Norse. . . .

'Well,' said one author who signed up, 'sod all that. I did a straight adventure novel and scattered a few Warhammer references to keep 'em happy.'

That wasn't 'Jack Yeovil' (Kim Newman), whose *Drachenfels* (GW, 247 pp., £4.99) leads the list, but the technique is vaguely similar. The book opens with a routine sequence of adventurers being picked off one by one as they penetrate the ultimate evil heart of (etc., etc.) . . . and then becomes a story about recreating all this twenty years on, as a play.

It's competently enough told, mixing light comedy with the Warhammer staples of chaos, death, popping eyeballs and nasty fluids: inoffensive, literate, and (thanks to heavy foreshadowing) predictable. Which sounds like faint praise, but puts it well ahead of the leadenly clichéd 'Dragonlance' series. Don't be deterred by the appearance.

This last was a surprise. *White Dwarf* covers have long been extremely eye- catching, but these books from the same stable look dim and messy, with the big 'Warhammer' motif invisible at any distance. Besides some neat Ian Miller vignettes, *Drachenfels* is illustrated with many dismal full-page drawings showing consistently shaky anatomy and lousy perspective. Better stuff appears monthly in *Dwarf*. Strange.

Small press plug: try *Back Brain Recluse*, a nicely packaged sf/fantasy magazine at £1.25 post free from Chris Reed, 16 Somersall Lane, Chesterfield, S40 3LA.

Well, I must go and stick some more pins in my waxen image of Whitley Strieber. . . .

— Dave Langford, 1989–90

THREE BY CORDWAINER SMITH

by Michael J. Tolley

Michael Tolley reviews:

NORSTRILIA
VGSF Classics No. 24; 575-04166-8;
1988, original publication 1975;
277 pp.; £2.95

THE REDISCOVERY OF MAN
VGSF Classics No. 25; 575-04165-X;
1988, original publication 1975;
378 pp.; £3.50

THE INSTRUMENTALITY OF MANKIND
VGSF Classics No. 28; 575-04167-6;
1988; 238 pp.; £3.50.

Everybody who wants a respectable science fiction library should have the collected works of Cordwainer Smith on the shelf, and Gollancz is to be congratulated for providing readers with the opportunity of achieving this end cheaply. All you need are these three volumes plus *Quest of the Three Worlds* (also in the VGSF series but not available to me for review).

It is astonishing that, in view of the high quality of Smith's prose, the range and unusual coherence of his future history, the memorable strangeness of his stories, and the readiness with which they offer themselves to critical discussion; in view also of their writer's eminence as the polymathic political scientist and authority on psychological warfare Dr Paul Myron Anthony Linebarger; that the mass of his work remains to be assimilated by students of science fiction. Aldiss and Wingrove, for instance, give him one mention in *Trillion Year Spree*, telling us that Delany is 'a blend of Jean Genet and Cordwainer Smith'. Paul A. Carter gives him a whole sentence in *The Creation of Tomorrow*. Lester del Rey is only a little more generous in *The World of Science Fiction, 1926-1976*, mentioning two stories by name. Such neglect is scandalous, for all of these writers would agree that Cordwainer Smith had a 'unique talent'. Perhaps that is the trouble: historians are more at ease with sameness than with difference.

It is a distinct bonus that these volumes come with some critical apparatus, *Rediscovery* and *Norstrilia* with notes on the author by John J. Pierce; *Instrumentality* with an introduction by Frederik Pohl. The short- story collections both have Pierce's helpful and persuasive 'Timeline from the Instrumentality of Mankind'.

As with Philip K. Dick, Australian fans have an honourable place in the history of establishing a place on the critical map for this author; indeed, John Foyster was about to expose the man behind the pseudonym (a secret kept for far longer than that of James Tiptree, Jr, I gather) when he found that Linebarger had died. Nevertheless, it seems symptomatic of the general neglect I have mentioned (there have been a very few important studies) that, when *ASFR* put out a special Cordwainer Smith issue in Spring 1989, three of the five articles published were reprinted from an issue of the first series of *ASFR*, for August 1967. The 1989 issue included an enthusiastic review by Norman Talbot of *Norstrilia* and *The Instrumentality of Mankind*; even he seems not to have known much about the two other books, which of course had

been available in earlier American editions. Norman has invited me to give a paper on Smith at the University of Newcastle in October 1990, so at last I am - - thanks to him and Bruce, who himself has a new Nova Mob paper on Smith published in last year's *ASFR* special issue – paying my own belated homage.

I had previously known *Norstrilia* through its component parts, the two short novels *The Planet Buyer* and *The Underpeople*, the first in the original Pyramid edition of 1964, the second in the Sphere paperback of 1975. Ironically, these provide a better text of the whole novel than the VGSF edition, which has perpetrated (or perpetuated) some appalling misprints, perhaps repeating those of the previous American fix-up (if that's the correct term) of 1975. There is even an extra chapter's worth of text, which one would hesitate to call dispensable, tucked into the beginning of *The Underpeople*.

Although *Norstrilia* is rightly published as a single novel, its episodic quality and the dangling participants among its minor characters seem to confirm my impression that Smith was not at his best in the longer form. At short novella length he could be superb, which makes *The Rediscovery of Man* (originally published as *The Best of Cordwainer Smith*, though it does not contain all 'the best' stories) the best value, containing as it does 'Scanners Live in Vain', 'Mother Hitton's Littul Kittons', 'Alpha Ralpha Boulevard', 'The Ballad of Lost C'mell' and, most memorable of all, 'A Planet Named Shayol'. *The Instrumentality of Mankind* has 'Drunkboat', which introduced Rambo to the world (my guess is that the plot for the story significantly influenced the first film called *Rambo*, though not the initiating book by David Morrell, *First Blood*; although, like Smith's Artyr Rambo, Morrell's character has from the beginning abundance of range, he is not betrayed into using it until he is sent into Vietnam on his rescue mission – and it is the betrayal that is the key to the plot similarity between 'Drunkboat' and *Rambo*). Also in the smaller collection is a non-Instrumentality novella (one of five stories placed outside the series by the editor, though one wonders about 'The Good Friends'), 'Angerhelm', which is remarkable for its evocation of the way it might feel to be dead and disembodied.

The range of mood in Cordwainer Smith's stories is extraordinary, from the hilarity of 'Western Science Is So Wonderful' and 'From Gustible's Planet' to the sentimentality of 'The Lady Who Sailed *The Soul*' (written in collaboration with Genevieve Linebarger) and 'The Game of Rat and Dragon' to the ironic ferocity of 'Mother Hitton's Littul Kittons'. He is rarely and briefly solemn, but his ethical statements are always worth hearing, whether in the retelling of the Eden story in 'Alpha Ralpha Boulevard' or the little sermon on salvation in the E'telekeli's counsel to his daughter in *Norstrilia* or the simple message of love brought by D'joan/Joan in Smith's reprise of the ending of *Stranger in a Strange Land* in 'The Dead Lady of Clown Town' (the whole Underpeople business constitutes a blistering attack on modern apartheid and, more specifically, southern American segregation). His ironies can be cruel and funny at the same time – but what do you expect from a master of brainwashing (whose lectures on the subject were comic occasions) whose sentimentality was so out of hand that he adored cats and who was so chronically ill that, according to Arthur Burns, who knew him when he was a Visiting Fellow at ANU, that he drank hydrochloric acid for medicinal purposes at a public dinner party? What you don't expect is what you get with Cordwainer Smith. Go for it!

– Michael J. Tolley, July 1990

MICHAEL TOLLEY teaches English at the University of Adelaide, while pursuing what sounds like a fulltime writing career on the side. Apart from some reviews he has promised me, during the next few months he hopes to finish 'a talk Norman Talbot asked me to give in Newcastle in October – and a review of the two new Dick biographies for Van Ikin – and hasty reading of out- of-print Australian crime fiction for [a new publishing project] – and trying to kick into shape an interdepartmental SF course for next semester – and – well, I have to look busy, at least.'

VINTAGE TOLLEY: Reviews of SF books

by Michael Tolley

WIZARDRY AND WILD ROMANCE:
A Study of Epic Fantasy
by Michael Moorcock

VGSF 575-04324-5;
1988, original publication 1987;
378 pp.; £3.95

The author should be so embarrassed by this amateurish publication that he seeks enrolment as a postgraduate student (if anyone will have him) and spends three years writing a Ph.D. on some congenial subject, such as the language of *The Silmarillion*, before he ventures to issue a revised edition.

Despite his propensity for Tolkien-bashing (notably in a chapter entitled 'Epic Pooh'), Moorcock's critical opinions are not despicable, but he has no idea of how to present or support them. His preferred 'method' is chunk-quotation, but it is rare that he gives us any guidance as to what to look for in the passage quoted. He seems incapable of defining 'epic fantasy':

> 'Epic fantasy' is a meaningless term – as meaningless as 'science fiction' – but we know roughly what is described by it. It covers a range of fiction from Morris to Peake. . . .

Moorcock is fond of Mervyn Peake, which is to his credit (though I could wish he were as good a writer in that vein in his imitations of Peake), but I would not class the Gormenghast trilogy with Morris or Tolkien. Peake wrote Gothic fiction, not 'epic fantasy' (which is what I might mean when I point to *The Lord of the Rings* or Stephen Donaldson's stuff or *The Water of the Wondrous Isles*). He seems to me to overrate Fitz Leiber (at least he gives me few reasons for rating Leiber more highly than I do) at the expense of, say, Jack Vance (who is mentioned twice, and then only with reference to *The Dying Earth*).

Surprisingly, Moorcock does not seem very well read in the field, probably not all that much better read than I am, and so he offers few discoveries. The ones I would want to look out for are George Meredith's *The Amazing Marriage* and Maurice Richardson's *The Exploits of Engelbrecht* (not in the less- than-adequate index but mentioned on page 229), and I suppose I shall eventually bring myself to read another of his favourites, M. John Harrison, even though his advocacy makes him sound dead boring.

As for his omissions: What about Orson Scott Card or Goldman's *The Princess Bride*? What about Aldiss and Harry Harrison (Moorcock must have fallen foul of Aldiss at some stage)? What about our own Damien Broderick's *The Black Grail*?

There is one *bon mot* (pp. 203f.): 'If the bulk of American sf could be said to be written by robots, about robots, for robots, then the bulk of English fantasy seems to be written by rabbits, about rabbits and for rabbits.'

ETERNITY
by Greg Bear

VGSF 575-04613-9;
1989, first publication 1988;
401 pp.; £5.99

It is unfortunate that the relative success of *Eon* has prompted the author to write a long, boring sequel in which the great Way through space-time, which had one terminus in the vicinity of near-future Earth, has for obscure reasons from the far future to be dismantled. Bear's obsessive tidying up of those lives he disrupted in *Eon* proceeds regardless of the reader's interest, as the necessary extrapolation and politicking is tediously marched through, step by step.

(continued on page 30)

COLIN STEELE is still the Librarian at the Australian National University. In a previous existence, he was Librarian at the Bodleian Library, Oxford University. His days there are remembered with some gratitude by Brian Aldiss in his *Bury My Heart at W. H. Smith's*.
The following reviews appeared first (and were sometimes shortened) in *The Canberra Times*. They are not in rank order, but appear approximately in the order in which they were written.

STEELE COLUMN

by Colin Steele

GRACE by Michael Stewart (Collins; 351 pp.; $A29.95).

Michael Stewart, with three best-selling novels to date, has carved out a fictional niche that is now termed 'scientific or psycho suspense'.

Stewart believes that if novels are truly to reflect the human condition, the world of science is a rich terrain that is being neglected. *Grace* resulted after Stewart, driving through Fatima in Portugal, a place associated with visionary experiences, recalled the book by Oliver Sacks on migraine and the suggestion that religious visions are nothing but hallucinations of a visionary type. Thus, when seventeen-year-old Grace Holmwood begins seeing visions of the Virgin Mary, one group, notably the Church, sees these as divinely inspired while the medical profession regards them as psychologically caused.

When a miracle of sight restoration occurs and Grace becomes pregnant, an historical pattern becomes decidedly pronounced. The causes of these phenomena are, however, firmly rooted in the scientific world, with several ethical falls from grace, but to reveal more would detract from the novel's considerable appeal as an instructive entertainment.

MOTHER LONDON by Michael Moorcock (Penguin; 496 pp.; $A12.99)

THE FORTRESS OF THE PEARL by Michael Moorcock (Grafton; 248 pp.; $A29.95).

Michael Moorcock, like Brian Aldiss, has always suffered in the eyes of most general readers from being categorized as a fantasy writer. His recent non-fantasy novels *Byzantium Endures*, *The Laughter of Carthage* and now *Mother London* reaffirm, however, that he is one of Britain's most distinguished and imaginative novelists.

Moorcock has said in a recent interview that 'What I write is a kind of myth that tells people, young people, look, you can do this, you can take control of your lives if you want to, and there's a bit of hope of some sort.' Thus the new Elric fantasy *The Fortress of the Pearl* has as much to do with Mrs Thatcher's England in its underlying themes as it has to do with sword and sorcery.

Mother London is a rich, sprawling Dickensian novel in its landscapes and complexity. It portrays the story of London from the Blitz to the present day through the eyes of three main characters, all of them with psychologically disturbed past lives. The narrative flashes back and forth across the decades as Moorcock carefully creates what amounts to a new myth of London. The end, even with one of the main characters dying, is a celebration of the human capacity for imaginative rebirth. Moorcock and London are the winners in this novel 'about what people believe, about the stories people tell one another, and how myths and legends serve to hold the people together'.

The exotic landscape of *The Fortress of the Pearl* is radically different from the bomb sites of the Blitz, but the underlying concerns are the same. Moorcock's first Elric novel for a decade is set early in the albino prince's career as he ventures out to gain 'the Pearl at the Heart of the World', which will secure him the antidote against a slow-acting poison in his body. Elric now has a social conscience and a hatred of autocratic government. Most Elric fans will be delighted with his return and his quest to save an unconscious female prophet trapped inside her mind, but others will relish the new texture and depth by unpeeling the Moorcockian layers of consciousness.

THE TOYNBEE CONVECTOR by Ray Bradbury (Grafton; 277 pp.; $A29.95)

Ray Bradbury, the author of such classics as *Fahrenheit 451* and *The Illustrated Man*, revealed in a recent interview that he was unable to sell some of the twenty-three short stories now collected in *The Toynbee Convector*.

On reading the collection, it is not difficult to see why. Bradbury is locked into the safe secure world of *The Saturday Evening Post*, for which he began writing in the 1940s. Current reality never intrudes, but more importantly, most of his characterization and plots are decidedly simple and lightweight. The title story is a case in point. An inventor fakes a trip forward in time and convinces the whole of humanity, given his projection of future bliss, that

death can be arrested, cancer cured, wars eradicated and the environment restored!

In 'I Suppose You Are Wondering Why We Are Here' a man brings his parents back from the dead, but finds his romantic image of them is false and they actually didn't like him at all! If Bradbury ever needed again to tell the reader what it is like to be a twelve-year-old in a small American town in the 1920s, then 'Colonel Stonested's Genuine Home-made Truly Egyptian Mummy' is yet another variant. Like Peter Pan, Bradbury is frozen in time, and only 'lost boys' will benefit from *The Toynbee Convector*.

PLAYING IN THE SAND by Christopher Hudson (Macmillan; 240 pp.; $A29.95).

British author Christopher Hudson's novel of British nuclear deceptions in South Australia in the early 1960s has received a good press in the UK, but for Australian readers there is not too much that is new or original.

The 'parochial' South Australia of the time has been more effectively recreated by Australian authors as diverse as Geoffrey Dutton and Barbara Hanrahan. Phrases such as 'vulgarity depresses one so — in England you can keep it at bay — out here you can't do that' no doubt appeal in Britain, as do Australian characters who speak in stock phrases such as 'bloody oath', 'Jeez' and 'I'm up a gum tree'.

The plot, other than the main character's wife falling in love with a British intelligence officer, centres around the secret release of plutonium in the Australian desert and the tragic consequences. The Maralinga enquiry in fact, and movies such as *Ground Zero* in fiction, have covered the ground more adequately. Hudson has said in a recent interview that only 'through images of poison — on the ground, in the food chain, in the atmosphere, ultimately in human relationships' could he convey the horror of the nuclear tests. *Playing in the Sand* in this context is decidedly slow poison.

THE BROKEN BUBBLE by Philip K. Dick (Gollancz; 246 pp.; $A35).

THE HISTORY OF LUMINOUS MOTION by Scott Bradfield (Bloomsbury; 198 pp.; $A34.95).

Brian Moore has called Scott Bradfield 'the most original voice of the new generation of Californian writers'. In many ways Philip K. Dick was that voice of the 1950s, but eight of his nine novels set in California were not published until after his death in 1982.

The latest to be published (in fact one of the earliest written), *The Broken Bubble*, is set in San Francisco in 1956, and recounts the 'driftings' and interaction of a small-town disc jockey Jim Briskin (who rebels against the playing of a commercial on air), his ex-wife and an impoverished pair of teenage would-be revolutionaries. Dick strikingly explores the bleakness of small-time commercial life in a society where moral perceptions are easily distorted. In the end, Briskin's desire for a personal relationship to set against the meaninglessness of life triumphs, albeit in muted fashion.

Scott Bradfield's slice of Californian life in *The History of Luminous Motion* is much crueller and more bizarre. Philip, the outrageously precocious eight-year-old son of a prostitute, is educated, about both life and literature, in the backs of cars cruising the Californian highways. Philip ends up in his own dream (and drug) world where reality allows the murder of anyone who comes between him and his mother. As his mother retreats into alcoholism, Philip becomes the dominant character, and childhood innocence is turned on its head. Philip concludes that 'childhood does not comfort or instruct, childhood isolates people'.

Bradfield and Dick both highlight the isolation of the individual in contemporary society. Dick's vision was not popular until the 1980s, but Bradfield's bleaker vision may be right for the time. American publisher Knopf has released a massive 50,000 copies in hardback of *The History of Luminous Motion* — a huge number for such a surreal first novel. Fans of Thomas Pynchon may have found his successor.

SINGULARITIES edited by Garry Wyatt (Canberra Science Fiction Society; $A6)

ZENITH edited by David S. Garnett (Sphere; 298 pp.; $A9.99)

DEMONS AND DREAMS: THE BEST FANTASY AND HORROR 1 edited by Ellen Datlow and Terri Windling (Legend; 482 pp.; $A19.95).

David Garnett writes in the introduction to *Zenith*, which is subtitled 'The Best in British Science Fiction', that the majority of leading sf authors began their careers writing short fiction for genre magazines.

Such magazines are now few and far between in Australia, but one local outlet for new authors is *Singularities*, an enterprising venture from the Canberra Science Fiction Society. *Singularities* features the best ten stories from the CSFS *Newsletter* as judged from the thirty stories submitted in 1989. David Tansey's 'Landing Lights', the winner, juxtaposes a triangular relationship with the discovery of an alien civilization in rural Australia. Despite this being two stories merged into one, 'Landing Lights' is a clear example of a story that needed greater length and depth to deal with its cosmic themes.

In this context Tansey handles the human characterization far better than the sf elements, which are of the *Close Encounters* variety. More polished in this respect is 'Explo-drama' by Vern Weitzel, in which a contracted Chinese geologist en route to Saturn is woken too early in the flight, but learns how to conquer fear and gain humanity. Another impressive Weitzel story, 'Bio-Patent', which came second in the competition, reveals the pressures of competitive science and a 'cosmic chain letter' in human genes.

On the evidence of *Singularities*, Canberra has unearthed some promising writing talent, if occasionally raw at the edges. *Singularities* represents

good value at six dollars for a professionally produced, albeit unpaginated, booklet from the Canberra Science Fiction Society, PO Box 47, Civic Square, ACT 2608.

Zenith's twelve original stories are one rung further up the ladder, with professionals such as Brian Aldiss and Robert Holdstock lining up with new names such as William King and Elisabeth Sourbut. The subjects are diverse. Lisa Tuttle's story of aliens in New Mexico is an effective presentation of a 'stranger in a strange land', while King's cyberpunk future of 'Skyrider' is dominated by drugs and spare organ trading. Barrington Bayley's 'Death Ship' is a time-travel story set within a 1984-type dictatorship.

Garnett's anthology never reaches great heights, but provides yet another forum for original sf writing in Britain.

Top of this current anthology heap is Ellen Datlow and Terri Windling's *Demons and Dreams: The Best Fantasy and Horror 1*, covering stories first published in 1987. It scores not only on price (released in Australia far below the British hardcover price equivalent) but also by maintaining a high level of quality over 200,000 words.

In their respective stories, both Jonathan Carroll and Ursula Le Guin explore the nature of communication via the animal world. John Bensink's tale of a family drowning in another, 'Lake George in High August', is a chilling piece, as is Edward Bryant's revelation in 'Author's Notes' of the mind of a psychotic writer.

While horror and fantasy occasionally sit together a little uneasily, Datlow and Windling, scouring a much wider small-press range than their main competitor, Gardner Dozois, have clearly entered the anthology stakes at the front of the pack.

THE DARK HALF by Stephen King (Hodder & Stoughton; 413 pp.; $A29.95)

THE DRAWING OF THE THREE by Stephen King (Sphere; 402 pp.; $A16.99)

BARE BONES: CONVERSATIONS ON TERROR WITH STEPHEN KING edited by Tim Underwood and Chuck Miller (New English Library; 217 pp.; $A29.95).

Stephen King is the world's best-selling fiction writer. His latest book, *The Dark Half*, had a North American hardback printing of 1.5 million volumes, while his current four-book contract with North American Library and Viking is reputed to be in excess of $35 million.

What makes King so successful, particularly in a genre such as horror, which has traditionally been disregarded?

King says in *Bare Bones*, an interesting if repetitive collection of interviews with him, that 'horror is one of the ways we walk our imagination . . . a way to relieve bad feelings'. Horror is thus an escape mechanism to sublimate our primal fears. If this was all, however, most horror writers would have no problem in joining King on the way to the bank.

King, however, is a master of what *Time* magazine has termed 'post-literate prose'. His narrative is cinematic in structure, with much scene shifting, his characters are strong and recognizable with traditional small-town decencies and flaws, while his dialogue is vulgarly realistic. King's novels have an instant appeal in the video age – even though, paradoxically, most of the films made from his novels, apart from *Carrie* and *Stand By Me*, have been less than successful artistically. King effectively blends humour and horror in landscapes dotted with contemporary icons, and yet which reflect age-old fears.

The publishing success of *The Dark Half* has also to be seen in the context of King's previous novels, through which a sense of familiarity and depth prevails. The Maine settings reflect previous novels such as *Cujo*, while the plot of *The Dark Half*, in which a literary writer tries to kill off his best-selling alter ego, has echoes of King's best novel, *Misery*, and King's own real-life 'death' of his pseudonym Richard Bachman.

Tom Beaumont, the main character in *The Dark Half*, had decided to bring to an end his best-selling gory thrillers written as George Stark in order to return to more literary endeavours. When there is a series of gruesome murders of Beaumont's publishing contacts, such as his agent and publicist, and the murderer calls himself George Stark, then Beaumont is in trouble – not least as his fingerprints are found at the scene of the murders. Are Beaumont and Stark a Jekyll-and-Hyde variant? The truth, as ever with King, is suitably bizarre, with a dramatic conclusion reminiscent of Hitchcock's *The Birds* – albeit birds from beyond the grave.

The Drawing of the Three, the second of a six-volume series entitled *The Dark Tower*, is essentially fantasy, but most of the King staple ingredients are present. The saga unfolds with the 'last gunslinger' (taken from Byron's *The Childe Harold*) continuing his quest to find 'the Dark Tower' in a post-holocaust future strewn with technological wreckage and mutated life forms. Roland has to draw assistance from other times – 'the drawing of the three'. Roland is on the archetypal quest, a lone seeker after an unknown truth. Roland in himself constitutes a 'reconfirming value' in a troubled world, which in a larger context King claims in *Bare Bones* for his work. Certainly horror stories can thus be both cathartic and reassuring. King without doubt has made awakening and allaying our fears a marketable obsession.

FIRST LIGHT by Peter Ackroyd (Hamish Hamilton; 328 pp.; $A29.95)

THE CHYMICAL WEDDING by Lindsay Clarke (Jonathan Cape; 542 pp.; $A29.95).

The interaction of the past and present is an increasingly recurrent theme of the leading younger British novelists such as Peter Ackroyd and Graham Swift. Now Lindsay Clarke in his second novel has produced a rich brew of historical and emotional interaction.

Ackroyd's most famous novel, *Hawksmoor*, the winner of the Guardian and the Whitbread fiction prizes, juxtaposed the eighteenth and twentieth centuries. In *First Light*, a group of archaeologists in Devon see past and present coalesce as they excavate a prehistoric barrow. In *The Chymical Wedding*, the tragic events enacted in a small village in the middle of the nineteenth century are paralleled in contemporary England. Both authors imply, through narratives of some complexity, that the past is neglected at our peril. This is putting it very simply indeed, as Ackroyd in particular aspires to great things: 'only those who died could comprehend time, for time was God'.

Both novels are clearly carefully constructed. *First Light* is replete with allusions to authors as diverse as Thomas Hardy, Oscar Wilde and Charles Dickens, while *The Chymical Wedding* leans heavily on historical research into alchemical traditions.

Ackroyd's characters are richly imagined. Mark Clare, an archaeologist, whose wife commits suicide, is balanced in the search of the meaning of life by Damian Fall, an astronomer, whose galactic obsession with Aldebaran ends in nervous breakdown. Time and stars become one. Characters totter on the edge of caricature, such as an ageing lesbian couple and a retired music-hall TV comedian, while a rural family, who hold the key to the secret of the prehistoric burial, are almost out of *Cold Comfort Farm*. Certainly no one is ordinary in *First Light*, but then they need to be extraordinary to stand out in Ackroyd's grandiose quest for life, the universe and everything.

In *The Chymical Wedding*, events in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries are recounted in alternate chapters. The events take place in an isolated Norfolk village where a poet, Alex Darken, retreats to ponder his broken marriage. He encounters a dissolute older poet who is investigating, with his young American lover Laura, the tragic events in the village a century earlier when an elderly magus, his free-thinking daughter Louisa, and the local vicar, Edwin Frere, become tragically intertwined in the search for alchemical truth.

As in *First Light*, the echoes of other authors resound. John Fowles's *The Magus* and, more particularly, *The Ebony Tower*, come to mind. This is not say that Clarke is not his own master of creation. His detailed research into the history of alchemy so infuses with credibility the work of Louisa and her father that their success and then tragedy is totally believable. Alchemy and the process of discovery become almost a counter-religion with the power to liberate souls and thus humanity. Frere, the 'mystical brother' of Louisa, symbolizes the age-old conflict of alchemy and Christianity and the clash of reason and morality.

One of the characters in *The Chymical Wedding* states: 'if the meaning was immediately obvious without having to work for it then we wouldn't value it'. The reader certainly has to work hard in *First Light* and *The Chymical Wedding* to ascertain their ultimate meanings. If the final verdict in both cases is perhaps of carefully crafted over-ambition, the quest in both is nonetheless stimulating.

DANCING AT THE EDGE OF THE WORLD by Ursula Le Guin (Gollancz; 306 pp.; $A39.95).

Dancing at the Edge of the World, American author Ursula Le Guin's second collection of reviews and essays, covers her non-fiction writings from 1976 to 1988. Best known for her works of creative imagination, such as the 'Earthsea' trilogy, and classic novels such as *The Left Hand of Darkness* and *The Dispossessed*, her non-fiction output, which Le Guin calls 'a sort of mental biography', has been less easy to track down.

Le Guin's talks, essays and reviews are assembled from a wide diversity of sources such as *The Yale Review* and *The Oregonian*. Le Guin's relative isolation in Portland, Oregon, has preserved a sharp, humanistic vision untrammelled by the fashions of literary cliques in the major centres. Le Guin argues that her goal is 'to subvert as much as possible without hurting anybody's feelings'. A fervent feminism pervades the contributions, but a feminism compatible with calling housework 'an art'. In her powerful 1988 essay 'The Fisherwomen's Daughter' she argues: 'the books-or-babies myth is not only a misogynist hang-up, it can be a feminist one'.

This essay also includes a defence of Margaret Drabble (certainly not required in Canberra after her Word Festival appearance): 'let us not let her be disappeared', although she is not averse to bringing Doris Lessing back to earth in reviews of the latter's 'Canopus in Argos' series. Equally cogent are the analyses of authors as diverse as C. S. Lewis and Italo Calvino. Le Guin also takes one of her own works, *The Beginning Place*, to task, under the pseudonym 'Mom de Plume', which she says is 'recommended to persons with mild inner-ear disturbances'!

Dancing at the Edge of the World is an eloquent and provocative series of essays on topics as diverse as abortion, gender differences and the techniques of writing to theories of civilization. Le Guin says 'it took me years to realize that I choose to work in such despised marginal genres such as science fiction, fantasy, young adult' because they left 'the artist free'. Le Guin is now firmly out in the open, and this collection amply reaffirms her place as one of America's leading writers.

THE DIAMOND THRONE by David Eddings (Grafton; 396 pp.; $A29.95)

PRINCE OF THE BLOOD by Raymond Feist (Grafton; 315 pp.; $A29.95)

FAERIE TALE by Raymond Feist (Grafton; 393 pp.; $A10.95)

KEEPER OF THE KEYS by Janny Wurts (Grafton; 306 pp.; $A29.95)

OTHER VOICES by Colin Greenland (Unwin; 182 pp.; $A11.95)

David Eddings, Raymond Feist and Stephen Donaldson are three of the current most popular

authors with young children and teenagers. One would hesitate, however, to estimate how many readers Eddings has in the adult bracket in contrast to Donaldson, whose works appeal to all ages.

With Eddings's fantasies, what you read is what you get: simple and cosy characterization, good and evil depicted in strong terms and quasi-medieval settings. *The Diamond Throne* is the first volume of a new series, 'The Elenium', which Eddings has started while still in the middle of another series, 'The Malloreon'. 'The Elenium' has firm historical roots in medieval Europe and, in particular, with the Knights Templar. In *The Diamond Throne* the young knight, Sparhawk, has just over a year to find the antidote, an ancient jewel, to overcome the poison in the body of his cryogenically preserved Queen. Predictable formula writing, but Eddings knows his market and his many fans won't be disappointed.

Common to all these fantasies are multi-novel series that feature adolescent main characters, who face external threats that accelerate their coming of age and/or finding of self. In *Prince of the Blood*, the fourth of Feist's 'Riftwar' saga, two young twin princes journey to a neighbouring kingdom. One prince is captured and believed killed by the other, who confronts the problems of a hedonistic Egyptian-style court. Each finds and makes his own destiny.

Feist's novel *Faerie Tale*, first published in 1988 and now released in paperback, has another set of twin boys, this time along with their step-sister, confronting some unpleasant faerie neighbours in upstate New York. While the terrors are there for the family to confront, a genuine sense of wonder is missing, as Celtic mythology and American family mores mix uneasily.

Janny Wurts collaborated with Feist in the best-selling 1987 novel *Daughter of the Empire*, and has now struck out on her own with a trilogy of which *Keeper of the Keys* is the second volume. Once more a young boy and a young girl have to battle evil forces, in this case demons, in a world wracked by elemental conflicts. For one of the main characters, Jaric, Wurts sums up that 'had he chosen his Firelord's inheritance without first finding himself . . . he would have failed'.

Dr Colin Greenland's *Other Voices* is easily the most cerebral, and therefore probably commercially the least successful, of this batch of fantasies. Greenland has the formula right — a world of small nation-states in a technology of sixteenth-century Europe in a follow-up to his earlier novel *The Hour of the Thin Ox*, with two young girls, one a princess and one an alchemist's daughter, as the two main characters. The pair's paths become entwined as they become involved in a struggle to liberate their small country from invaders. Rather than presenting a simple narrative, however, Greenland questions the perennial struggle for power, both on an individual and national level, and the contrasting role of women in societies. *Other Voices* may, however, not be heard above the sound of the other commercial fantasies.

THE BLOOMSBURY GOOD READING GUIDE TO SCIENCE FICTION AND FANTASY by M. H. Zool (Bloomsbury; $A12.95)

ASTOUNDING DAYS by Arthur C. Clarke (Gollancz; $A29.95)

RAMA 2 by Arthur C. Clarke and Gentry Lee (Gollancz; $A29.95)

ABYSS by Orson Scott Card (Legend; $A9.95)

IMAGO: XENOGENSIS 3 by Octavia Butler (Gollancz; $A32.95)

THE FATHER-THING by Philip K. Dick (Gollancz; $35)

TIDES OF LIGHT by Gregory Benford (Gollancz; $29.95)

ETERNITY by Greg Bear (Gollancz; $A15.95)

TANGENTS by Greg Bear (Gollancz; $A29.95)

SECRET HARMONIES by Paul McAuley (Gollancz; $A32.95)

KILLER PLANET by Bob Shaw (Gollancz; $A19.95)

THE FUGITIVE WORLDS by Bob Shaw (Gollancz; $A29.95)

THE WAR OF THE SKY LORDS by John Brosnan (Gollancz; $29.95)

MONA LISA OVERDRIVE by William Gibson (Grafton; $A10.95)

The Bloomsbury Good Reading Guide to Science Fiction & Fantasy by M. H. Zool provides a point of reference to an overview of the plethora of science fiction being released by the major publishers, notably Gollancz, which reflects the continued boom in the genre.

While sf readers traditionally begin at an early age, it is fascinating that recent studies of the readership of *Analog* and *Isaac Asimov's Magazine* revealed the median age of their readers to be 41.4, with most being college graduates with an average household income of $A66,000.

Most of these readers would not require Zool's *Bloomsbury Good Reading Guide*, which is a basic but sound listing of leading sf authors, and their most important works. Experienced fans prefer more extensive sources such as Barron's *Anatomy of Wonder* (Bowker) and Aldiss and Wingrove's *Trillion Year Spree* (Gollancz).

Science fiction began in the twentieth century in pulp magazines such as *Astounding*. Arthur C. Clarke, in *Astounding Days*, bases his recollections of his childhood and adolescence, before he be-

came 'The Prophet of the Space Age', around the early issues of *Astounding*.

Clarke's capacity to evoke a scientific sense of wonder are encapsulated in such works as *2001* (1968) and *Rendezvous with Rama* (1973), which is chosen by Zool as the best example of Clarke's work.

This portayal of an alien spaceship world entering our solar system, and the wonder of subsequent scientific discovery that ensued, is now diluted by a sequel, *Rama 2*, which Clarke co-wrote with NASA scientist Gentry Lee. Clarke states in a postscript that 'collaboration is a risky business' and clearly believes he has overcome it.

On the evidence of *Rama 2*, however, and his first collaboration with Lee, *Cradle* (1988), it is Clarke's reputation, if not bank balance, that will suffer. The scientific exploration of this second Rama spaceship has more to do with human activities such as sex, religion and the power of the media than any sense of alien wonder.

Given the huge shock of the knowledge of the existence of other civilizations brought about by *Rendezvous with Rama*, humanity seems to have progressed little as the cosmonauts squabble on familiar 1990 lines.

Cradle also shared elements of soap opera, but at least this was explicable given that it was originally written as a film script. Clarke has said that the plethora of underwater movies then in production buried *Cradle*'s subsequent filming. The biggest of these in financial terms, *Abyss*, was released in Australia at the end of 1989.

The story of an underwater exploration team trying to recover a lost nuclear submarine off the Cayman Trench and encountering aliens has been termed 'Close Encounters of the Watery Kind'. The novel of *Abyss* by Orson Scott Card provides more background detail, and is preferable to the movie version. The fictional depiction of aliens has fluctuated over the decades. In the 1950s the aliens were generally represented as hostile, reflecting underlying American concerns with UFOs, radiation and the threat of communism. In the 1980s, aliens were far more benevolent or neutrally depicted.

Octavia Butler's 'Xenogensis' trilogy has now been successfully completed with *Imago: Xenogenesis 3*, in which an alien race, the Oankali, interbreed to 'save' the remnants of humanity. Butler, through this trilogy, also reflects today's differences and what they mean: that is, racial and physical differences and differences in intelligence.

Philip K. Dick, who died in 1982, was another to provide social commentaries through his fiction. The third in the series of his collected short fiction, *The Father-Thing*, includes twenty-three short stories, largely written in 1953–4. 'Foster, You're Dead' evokes the nuclear war hysteria of the early 1950s as consumers vie to buy the latest fallout shelter. In 'The Golden Man', the evolution of a superhuman foreshadows the end of humanity as we know it.

Dr Gregory Benford's bleak view of humanity in the far future began in *Great Sky River* (1987), and continues in *Tides of Light*. Humanity flees from planet to planet to escape the machine intelligence that dominates the galaxy.

In the latest novel, a temporary alliance with human cyborgs allows the quest for sanctuary to continue. Benford, like his American contemporary Greg Bear, weaves contemporary 'hard science' into some enthralling fictions.

Bear's *Eon* was a global bestseller, and its successor, *Eternity*, is equally breathtaking, with concepts that owe much to the writings of the early Clarke and Olaf Stapledon.

Bear's short stories, collected in *Tangents*, are equally inventive, notably 'Blood Music', in which biochip engineering transforms the human race.

Another scientist recently to break successfully into the sf field is biologist Dr Paul McAuley of Oxford University, whose first novel *Four Hundred Billion Stars* (1988) shared the Philip K. Dick Award.

His second novel, *Secret Harmonies*, has eighteenth-century Australian affinities. A remote colony, reliant on earth for supplies and scientific knowledge, and with a local 'aboriginal' population, is cut off, and local warfare erupts. McAuley here effectively contrasts the evolution of societies.

M. H. Zool states of British writer Bob Shaw that his main interest is in the human ramifications of unusual sciences, as in *Other Days, Other Eyes* (1972), but Shaw's latest novels, *Killer Planet* and *The Fugitive Worlds*, are weak in this respect.

Shaw's first story for children, *Killer Planet*, is pure pulp fiction with cardboard characters, notably adolescents who confront and defeat an alien monster on a distant planet and find each other.

Shaw's 'Ragged Astronauts' series, which began in 1986, has also fallen away badly from its promising beginning of twin planets between which 'astronauts' floated and battled in hot-air balloons.

The latest volume of the series, *The Fugitive Worlds*, however, lacks inventiveness and, far from completing the trilogy, seems to leave the way open for future stories.

Huge airships also feature in Australian writer John Brosnan's *War of the Sky Lords*, a readable yet repellent saga in which male chauvinists ruthlessly subordinate the remnants of humanity, notably females, from the skies of a future devastated earth.

The female revolt, begun in *The Sky Lords*, is continued with the hope of a utopian shangri-la revealed at the end of this middle volume of the trilogy.

Far more realistic is William Gibson's cyberpunk future of *Mona Lisa Overdrive*, begun in the award-winning *Neuromancer* and continued in *Count Zero*.

Gibson's work lies squarely in the best traditions of science fiction, that is, to extrapolate from today to provide a realistic vision of, and for, tomorrow. Gibson's future images linger on the retina of the reader's imagination.

THE CHILD GARDEN by Geoff Ryman (Unwin Hyman; 338 pp.; $A34.95).

Award-winning Canadian writer Geoff Ryman has produced in *The Child Garden* a complex novel depicting a strange and terrifying future world.

Cancer has been cured, but only at the cost of increased senescence, which leads to death around the age of thirty-five. Changes in the climate have made London semi-tropical, with its inhabitants biologically engineered to photosynthesize. Representative democracy is a thing of the past, and consensus rules through 'The Party', which vaccinates infants so that both learning and unwelcome personality traits are accelerated and removed respectively. A young actress, Milena, fights the forbidden love of other women while attempting to stage an operatic version of Dante's *The Divine Comedy*.

Such descriptions, however, only scratch the surface of the plethora of detail and issues portrayed in *The Child Garden*, which is perhaps too rich in content and style for its ultimate message that to love is to be free and that individual creativity will overcome collective rigidity. *The Child Garden* equates to a fictional box of Turkish delight: to savour some aspects is pleasant but an over-indulgence in the total contents is indigestible.

TERRAPLANE by Jack Womack (Unwin Hyman; 227 pp.; $A29.95).

Twenty-first century Russia in the post-Gorbachev era outstrips America in capitalist and consumer fervour. Such is the opening backdrop for American author Jack Womack's second novel, which features some of the characters who survived from the deeply divided and brutal New York of his award-winning first novel *Ambient* (1988).

An American attempt to steal a secret Russian military device leads to an unwelcome escape back into an alternate America of the twentieth century, an America in which Roosevelt died before the 1930s Depression was overcome and slavery has only just been abolished. Civilizations's faults and virtues, however, remain the same, as does the perennial struggle for survival. Womack's bleak vision of *Ambient* is undoubtedly lifted by the deadpan humour of *Terraplane*, but humanity still wanders lost in whatever world it inhabits.

GOOD OMENS by Terry Pratchett and Neil Gaiman (Gollancz; 268 pp.; $A27.95)

TRUCKERS by Terry Pratchett (Doubleday; 190 pp.; $A17.95)

DIGGERS by Terry Pratchett (Doubleday; 153 pp.; $A17.95).

The latest novels from the incredibly prolific Terry Pratchett reaffirm his position as one of Britain's leading comic writers. Pratchett's zany but logically consistent frameworks allow him to fire parodies, puns and asides about contempory society. Simple quotations from the texts fail to do justice to the sustained hysteria that results from total immersion in Pratchett's creations. Pratchett is in the style of the Goons and Monty Python, albeit with much gentler humour.

Good Omens, a spoof of the whole horror genre, is Pratchett's first collaboration. A boy Antichrist is born in Britain and, even if he loves the environment and his dog, it needs a strange alliance with a lapsed angel and an affable demon to prevent Armageddon occurring 'just after tea on Saturday'.

As ever, it is Pratchett's inventive wit, seasoned by Gaiman's dark visions, that appeals. Anyone who has travelled on London's M25 motorway could easily envisage it is the work of the Devil, while Aziraphael, the angel masquerading as a typical secondhand book dealer, uses 'every means short of actual physical violence to prevent customers from making a purchase. Unpleasant damp smells, glowering looks, erratic opening hours!' There are seers who think of their shopping lists in seances, demons who listen to Queen music, as well as 'four motorcyclists of the Apocalypse'. *Good Omens* is a potent brew of magical mayhem and anarchic comedy.

Truckers was supposedly written for children, but many of Pratchett's 'Discworld' adult fans will revel in this story of four-inch aliens or 'nomes' who find refuge beneath the floorboards of a department store, only to discover it is shortly to be demolished. In a classic science fiction plot, the nomes have forgotten their origins and created a whole new tribal mythology. This is captured in the 'Book of the Nome', quotations from which begin each chapter. Thus 'In the Store there was neither Night nor Day, only Opening and Closing Time . . . and the nomes grew fat and multiplied . . . and forgot all they knew of the Outside.' The nomes take on the attributes of the floor they live on – militaristic in 'Ironmongeri' and effeminate in 'Lingeri'.

The 'nomes' have to flee the store, and in *Diggers* they reach an abandoned quarry, but the real world is not like the Department Store, where snowflakes glittered and hung from the roof, not the cold wet stuff that freezes! Masklin, the hero of *Truckers*, is mostly off-stage (page) in this volume, while his girlfriend tries to keep the nomes together in another hilarious mixture of adventure and self-discovery. Like Richard Adams's rabbits, Pratchett's 'nomes' are but humanity reflected through an unusual vision.

THE LONG HABIT OF DYING by Joe Haldeman (NEL; $A17.95)

ORBITAL DECAY by Allan Steele (Legend; $A9.95)

THE GATE TO WOMEN'S COUNTRY by Sheri S. Tepper (Bantam; $A16.95)

MEMORIES by Mike McQuay (Headline; $A11.95).

A quartet of recent sf paperbacks range in time from the near to the far future, and in subject content from longevity drugs to feminist dystopias.

Nearest to the present day is Joe Haldeman's *The Long Habit of Dying* [US title *Buying Time*] in which a temporary cure for old age has been invented. The price is substantial – all the

candidate's assets, which must total at least one million pounds sterling. These 'immortals' then have ten to twelve years to rebuild a fortune to continue the process. When Haldeman's hero uncovers a conspiracy amongst the medical cartel, his life is soon in danger. Haldeman provides an intriguing narrative before an unneeded *deus ex machina* solution.

Early in the next century, orbital and power space stations are being built by 'beam jacks'. This is the background to Allen Steele's impressive first novel *Orbital Decay*, which mixes hard science with the rumbustious lives of a set of orbital 'roughriders' who overcome or blot out their problems with a mixture of sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll. Space may be the ultimate frontier, but people remain the same.

Women, however, try to change the nature of society after a disastrous nuclear war, in Sheri S. Tepper's *The Gate to Women's Country*. Men have been segregated into closed military garrisons and receive limited education so that science and government remain firmly in the hands of the women. Power is, however, more a burden than a glory, and Tepper's principal character questions the system, with mixed results.

Another bleak future, but this time environmentally induced, is found in Mike McQuay's *Memories*. The only escape is back in time, but when a psychopathic patient escapes from the future and becomes Napoleon, the whole course of history is threatened. The female 'drug chemist' responsible for this lapse in time joins forces with a troubled psychiatrist from the present time to return to the Napoleonic era. Beneath this somewhat curious story line, however, is a powerful novel in which three adults, all mentally 'damaged' in some way, seek individual and collective freedom. As ever, the best sf provides an exploration of the human condition.

ANGEL STATION by Walter Jon Williams (Orbit; 393 pp.; $A29.95.).

American author Walter Jon Williams has created in *Angel Station* a superbly realistic cyberpunk future in which entrepreneurial trader families ply a precarious business on the edge of interstellar space. Children can be produced from spare genetic material and personality programs. Two such products, Ubu and Maria, struggle to survive in their tawdry fringe world of perpetual twilight punctuated by exploding holographic advertising. Their escape to deep space brings the first alien contact and a new power base in the galaxy.

Williams has perhaps mixed too many standard sf elements in the one novel to be totally successful, but his vision of the future is richly textured.

AT WINTER'S END by Robert Silverberg (Legend; 491 pp.; $A9.95)

THE QUEEN OF SPRINGTIME by Robert Silverberg (Gollancz; 415 pp.; $A29.95)

RETURN TO EDEN by Harry Harrison (Grafton; 400 pp.; $A10.95)

CHUNG KUO by David Wingrove (NEL; 501 pp.; $A17.95).

All four novels, which are parts of series, analyse humanity from different time perspectives, in the case of Harrison and Wingrove via alternative world images of Earth, and Silverberg from the vantage point of the far future.

Silverberg's *At Winter's End* and *The Queen of Springtime*, the first two volumes of a trilogy, have much in common with Brian Aldiss's 'Helliconia' trilogy except that Silverberg's cyclical saga is set on an Earth whose climate has been devastated by a new Ice Age rather than on a distant planet. Silverberg's remnants of humanity (or are they?) crawl out from underground cocoons 'at winter's end' to rediscover a new world of strange geography and biological mutations.

The first volume is a 'rite of passage' seen through the eyes of a young boy, while the second sees a struggle for supremacy between two of the evolved species. While not completely original in concept, Silverberg's trilogy confirms his return to the quality writing of the early 1970s that established him as one of the leading authors of science fiction.

Harrison in *Return to Eden*, the last volume of a trilogy, portrays similar struggles, but this time in an alternate prehistoric Earth in which the dinosaurs did not become extinct but evolved, as the Yilane, into the dominant life form over the humans, the Tanu. From a well-thought-out original scenario, aided by academic linguists and biologists, Harrison's series has fallen away badly into a series of running battles that conclude with a brittle uneasy peace.

The peace of David Wingrove's *Chung Kuo* world of the twenty-second century is a Chinese one, but a China where the Communist Revolution never occurred in a lasting sense. Thirty-four billion people are ruled in hierarchical fashion, a hierarchy that is also reflected in the physical structure of the global cities, with the bottom level, 'the Clay', being a bleak no man's land.

With another six volumes to come, this series appears to be a mixture of a *Dallas*-type dynastic saga and science fiction pulp that never succeeds as a whole. Characterization is limited, and dialogue often cliché-ridden. Gratuitous descriptions of sado-masochistic sex are clearly intended to move the novel out of the genre readership into the airport bookstalls. Wingrove has never visited China. For a work of fiction this is not necessary, but to picture a society of such complexity, drawing the surface veneer is not enough. The China of the future deserves better than another six volumes of 'sinoporn'.

INTERZONE 4 edited by John Clute, David Pringle and Simon Ounsley (Simon & Schuster; 208 pp.; $A24.95)

THE SECOND ORBIT YEARBOOK edited by David Garnett (Futura; 347 pp.; $A14.95)

OTHER EDENS 3 edited by Christopher Evans and Robert Holdstock (Unwin; 237 pp.; $A10.95)

REACH FOR TOMORROW by Arthur C. Clarke (Gollancz; 166 pp.; $A8.95).

Five collections of short stories reflect the continued verve and originality of this form of writing in the science fiction field.

Interzone emerged in the 1980s as one of the leading magazine outlets in Britain for imaginative fiction. Even more remarkably, from a small press beginning it has prospered to become a successful monthly magazine. *Interzone 4* continues the process of hardback reprinting of its 'best' stories, in this case from 1988 to 1989. Australian writer Greg Egan produces one of the most powerful stories, 'Cutie', in which biomedical engineering allows single males to have children, but children who die at the age of four. Barrington J. Bayley, in an anti-war story called 'Tommy Atkins' fuses an Orwell scenario with a World War II that has been continued through wide-scale limb donations.

J. G. Ballard features in *Interzone 4* with a typical story of alienation in suburbia, while *The Second Orbit Yearbook*, which collects the best short sf of 1988, includes his 'The Secret History of World War Three'. Ronald Reagan is restored to the American Presidency by popular acclaim in 1993, and America pays more attention to his medical bulletins than a brief nuclear exchange. Jack Massa's 'Prayerware' postulates only too convincingly the development of software to which people pray. *The Second Orbit Yearbook*, which also includes non-fiction pieces by Brian Aldiss and John Clute, represents excellent value for money.

Less successful is *Other Edens 3*, the latest in a series of original anthologies, which reflects in a number of stories the separate themes of witchcraft — such as Keith Roberts's 'The Grey Wethers' — and the breakdown of society. Brian Aldiss, in 'A Tupolev Too Far', tells of an alternative world in which our world is the unreal one, and Gorbachev's Russia has been reversed with that of the Tsars.

Far more imaginative are the nineteen stories in *Strange Things in Close- Up*, the collection by American writer Howard Waldrop. Waldrop ranges from horror to humour, from pop culture to parody. He evokes childhood memories of rock-and-roll heroes and movie heroes, but with strange twists. In 'Ike at the Mike', Eisenhower is a jazz musician and Aaron Presley a senator. In 'Save a Place in the Lifeboat for Me', the air crash in which Buddy Holly died takes a different path. The award-winning story 'The Ugly Chicken' is a tragicomic search for the last dodo in Mississippi.

Arthur C. Clarke writes few short stories these days, preferring to turn out, with Gentry Lee, pulp sequels to his best works. *Reach for Tomorrow* is a reprint of his early collection of short stories. A 1989 preface by Clarke reveals how his uncanny sense of scientific prediction has kept this early fiction fresh. In 'Rescue Party', Clarke's first published story, the technologically superior alien rescue party to Earth finds that in the end they will need rescuing. Clarke's evocation of sf's sense of wonder has never been stronger than in this welcome reprint by Gollancz.

THE COSMIC TRILOGY by C. S. Lewis (Bodley Head; 651 pp.; $A32.95).

The English novelist John Wain has recalled in *The Oxford Magazine* the trepidation he felt when invited in 1944 to lunch with C. S. Lewis. Lewis was 'then at the height of his fame as controversialist, religious apologist, a star of radio at a time when radio made stars as TV does now'. It is difficult now to imagine such a media impact after the plethora of 'warts and all' books about Lewis in recent years, a tradition continued in 1990 by A. N. Wilson's iconoclastic biography. Wilson describes Lewis as one who 'plumbed the irrational depths of childhood and religion'. That may be exactly why Lewis will be best remembered for his fiction works, the 'Narnia Chronicles' and the 'Cosmic Trilogy', the latter now reisssued in a handy one-volume edition by Bodley Head.

Out of the Silent Planet (1938), *Perelandra* (1943) and *That Hideous Strength* (1945), which comprise the trilogy, constitute a Christian allegory disguised as science fiction and fantasy. The central character, the linguist Dr Elwin Ransom (loosely based on J. R. R. Tolkien) changes, like Bilbo and Frodo, during the course of his battles against evil.

In *Out of the Silent Planet*, Lewis superbly imagines the various intelligent races found on Malacandra (Mars) and explicitly rejects the blind expansionism of the human race.

In *Perelandra*, the name of the Edenic planet Venus, another version of the Fall is re-enacted as Lewis ponders questions of free will and predestination.

The final volume, *That Hideous Strength*, is set on Earth, and is an attack on what Lewis termed the 'pseudosciences', that is, the behavioural sciences, used in direct state planning for an achievement of power embodied in NICE (the National Institute of Co-ordinated Experiments). This novel is also regarded as a rejection of Lewis's troubled boarding-school life which, in Lewis's words, encouraged the 'cruelty and arrogance of the strong, the toadyism and mutual treachery of the weak and the unqualified snobbery of both'.

Unlike school, where no rescue came for Lewis, the forces of evil in *That Hideous Strength* are defeated by a combination of a resurrected Merlin, angels and a small band of fervent humans. While Lewis's theological debates may be a little protracted for some of today's new readers, and his prose, particularly in *That Hideous Strength*, occasionally turgid, Lewis's cosmic trilogy, in this welcome new edition, remains a classic of mythic imagination.

CASABLANCA by Michael Moorcock (Gollancz; 267 pp.; $A29.95).

Michael Moorcock is one of Britain's most prolific and wide- ranging writers. *Casablanca*, which brings together twenty-four of his fiction and non-fiction pieces, unfortunately does not represent the best of his writing.

In the introduction to *Casablanca*, Moorcock indicates that 'much of the non fiction is political and some of the stories have a political cast'. The

problem is that the Moorcock message often dominates the medium, to the latter's detriment. The 'political' non-fiction is both too polemical and too superficial. Who could disagree with the sentiments in 'Building a New Jerusalem' that 'the best answer to crime is to spend more on improving the quality of life . . . to reduce tensions . . . to emphasise equality, to provide real hope, a moral education based on a profound belief in liberty and egalitarianism'? And so say all of us — but charging the Surrey commuters a non-resident's tax is only going to pay for a small fraction of Moorcock's new 'village' capital of London.

More cogent are the literary overviews of authors such as Angus Wilson and Mervyn Peake, the latter possessing the mythic quality so admired by Moorcock and encapsulated in one of his best novels, *Mother London* (1988).

Moorcock's fantasy novels have questioned current reality from a cosmic viewpoint. Thus Moorcock's 'hero' Jerry Cornelius reflected the nuances and issues of the 1960s in a series of novels and short stories. The activities of Cornelius and associated characters in two pieces in *Casablanca*, one featuring the 1970s punk rock group the Sex Pistols, will only serve, however, to confuse the reader unless he or she is aware of Moorcock's previous fictional 'tangos of entropy'.

Even the best fiction pieces — 'Casablanca', set in a future affluent North Africa where Islamic power struggles are foreshadowed, and 'Mars', evoking a resting place of sorrow and peace — are reminiscent of J. G. Ballard and Ray Bradbury respectively.

Michael Moorcock is decidedly his own voice, but the voices of *Casablanca* are too shrill and derivative to make this a memorable collection.

BUFFALO GALS by Ursula K. Le Guin (Gollancz; 196 pp.; $A29.95).

Ursula Le Guin's new collection of short stories, *Buffalo Gals*, focuses on animal themes. In her introduction. Le Guin argues that women, children and animals have too often been regarded as the 'other'. The myth of civilization, 'embodied in the monotheisms which assign soul to man alone', is what talking animal stories mock or subvert.

The stories and poems collected in *Buffalo Gals* may be a little lightweight to support such an introductory infrastructure, but they are entertaining and thought-provoking nonetheless. The award-winning title story tells of a child lost after a plane crash finding refuge in a shape-changing animal community. Le Guin shows the interdependence of all life forms, although humanity retains the capacity for irrational destruction. 'May's Lion' takes a real-life incident in Le Guin's Napa Valley childhood and recounts the death of a mountain lion from both fictional and factual viewpoints.

Le Guin's visions from the animal perspective provide a powerful and troubling insight into our own world.

THE TREASON OF ISENGARD by J. R. R. Tolkien (Unwin Hyman; 504 pp.; $A49.95).

The Treason of Isengard is the seventh volume in Christopher Tolkien's republication of his father's numerous drafts and rewritings that constitute 'The History of Middle-Earth'. It is the second volume to underpin *The Lord of the Rings*, and as such has more popular appeal than some of the earlier volumes of the series.

Nonetheless, only the true Tolkien enthusiast probably would wish to examine in detail the variant topographies and drawings of the maps of the western regions of Middle-Earth, or the redevelopment of Bilbo's song at Rivendell, or the emergence of Lothlorien and, more particularly, of Saruman the White in the fortress of Isengard.

One can easily appreciate the broad canvas of *The Lord of the Rings* without these textual volumes, but for a deeper scholarly understanding of the fictional brush strokes they are undoubtedly required reading.

CARRION COMFORT by Dan Simmons (Headline; 690 pp.; $A17.95)

THE DARK DOOR by Kate Wilhelm (Gollancz; 248 pp.; $A29.95)

THE WOLF'S HOUR by Robert McCammon (Grafton; 720 pp.; $A10.99)

IN THE HOLLOW OF THE DEEP SEA WAVE by Garry Kilworth (Unwin Hyman; 232 pp.; $A12.95)

DARK VOICES edited by Stephen Jones and Clarence Paget (Pan; 348 pp.; $A10.99).

Horror and the blockbuster novel came of age with Stephen King. Indeed, the recently released uncut version of King's *The Stand* runs to well over 1000 pages. In many instances, as in Clive Barker's latest novels and Robert McCammon's *The Wolf's Hour*, editorial austerity should have prevailed over horrific self-indulgence.

Dan Simmons's *Carrion Comfort*, at nearly 700 pages, totters on this brink, but ultimately succeeds. Simmons is still relatively unknown in Australia, despite his recently published novels *Hyperion* and *The Fall of Hyperion* being major imaginative achievements. In *Carrion Comfort* Simmons, perhaps with calculation, includes 'bestseller' vignettes of Nazi concentration camps and Hollywood in his plot of 'mind vampires' who can telepathically control their victims and force them to acts of violence and death. Pitted against the psychic evil are a strange, but ultimately effective, trio of a young black woman, a Southern sheriff and a Jewish psychiatrist.

The horror of Kate Wilhelm's *The Dark Door* comes from outer space. Wilhelm's husband-and-wife investigators, who featured in *The Hamlet Trap* and *Smart House*, probe a series of arson attacks on empty hotels, only to find a rogue alien machine to be the culprit. Wilhelm lets the reader know this in the first few pages, so that it is the

interplay of personalities that dominates, as well as the growing concern that the horrific deaths surrounding the fires will also engulf Wilhelm's investigators. *The Dark Door* is an unusual mix of Agatha Christie and *Close Encounters* of a more horrific kind.

With *glasnost* removing the Russians as public enemy number one in spy novels, horror writers, unless they use the supernatural, as Simmons does, or the extraterrestrial, as Wilhelm does, continue to 'revive' the Nazis. Robert McCammon, whose recent collection of short stories, *Blue World*, was a superb evocation of contemporary American horrors, loses his way in *The Wolf's Hour*. This is an overlong and farfetched tale of a British secret agent and part-time werewolf who takes on the task of finding and destroying a Nazi secret weapon. *The Wolf's Hour* is an unsuccessful mix of genres.

British author Garry Kilworth, in contrast to most American writers of horror, produces sparse, chilly vignettes in his collection of stories *In the Hollow of the Deep Sea Wave*. The title novella tells of the arrival of a new school teacher on an island in the Maldives, and the inexorable penalty that is unleashed for the murder and rape of a young girl by his predecessor. Other stories set in Singapore and Malaysia highlight the alienation caused by a lack of apreciation of different cultures.

Dark Voices is subtitled *The Best from the Pan Book of Horror Stories*, and is a selection from the long-running series that began under Herbert van Thal's editorship in 1959. Most of the leading horror writers feature either with a story or an introduction. Stephen King is represented by an early story, 'The Mangler', which recounts a gruesome terror unleashed in a laundry, while Ian McEwan, like Kilworth, proves that horror need not consist of up-front blood and gore. The quiet chill of despair that came in McEwan's novel *A Child in Time* is reflected in 'Pornography', in which two nurses exact a mind-numbing revenge on a small-time pornographer.

With authors as diverse as Ray Bradbury, John Lennon and Robert Block, *Dark Voices* represents an excellent overview of the various strands of the increasingly successful horror publishing scene.

EDEN by Stanislaw Lem (Andre Deutsch; 262 pp.; $A39.95).

Stanislaw Lem is now the most translated non-English writer of science fiction since Jules Verne. On the evidence of *Eden*, however, there must be questions as to the continuation of this publishing popularity. *Eden* is packaged as a new book by Lem, but it is in fact his first science fiction novel, which first appeared in Polish in 1959. This renders some of Lem's science and 'information theory' archaic, while his themes replicate better-known works such as *Solaris* (1961) and *Fiasco* (1988).

Lem's characters are deliberately never rounded, and *Eden* is no exception. The six-man crew of an Earth spaceship, which crashes on the planet Eden, are therefore known simply by their roles – that is, the Doctor, the Chemist, and so on.

Lem prefers to view humanity as a whole, and often a fairly depressing whole at that. While the spaceship is being repaired, attempts are made to comprehend the bizarre alien life forms. The members of the crew eventually leave, no wiser as to the overall structure of Eden's life forms. Lem is reaffirming at some length the limits of human understanding, with this Eden containing the slow poison of incomprehension.

CREED by Brian Herbert (Hodder & Stoughton; 319 pp.; $A29.95).

James Herbert is Britain's best-selling horror writer. *Creed* has confirmed this success by topping the hardback bestseller lists in the UK. Herbert is no Stephen King, however, in terms of the evocation of small-town mores and portrayal of society's underlying fears. Herbert's novels are largely entertainment with 'heroes people can identify with, [who] don't pontificate, they are not goody-goody, they're not wet, they are a little bit rough-and- tumble'.

Joseph Creed, Herbert's principal chracter, certainly fits this description. A freelance celebrity photographer, unkempt in dress and behaviour, he photographs at a funeral a man reputedly hanged for murder in 1939. Herbert cleverly builds up the tension of Creed's growing suspicions of the 'black forces' abroad and the increasing threats on his life as he comes closer to the truth. The final conflict between London's 'rat pack' of photographers and the literally decaying forces of evil is sufficiently over the top to be successful black humour.

THEO AND MATILDA by Rachel Billington (Macmillan; 343 pp.; $A29.95)

RATS AND GARGOYLES by Mary Gentle (Bantam; 414 pp.; $A26.95)

THE SCIONS OF SHANNARA by Terry Brooks (Orbit; 389 pp.; $A32.95)

SHADOWFANE by Janny Wurts (Grafton; 318 pp.; $A26.95)

DRAGONSPELL by Katherine Kerr (Grafton; 378 pp.; $A29.99).

British individuality contrasts strongly with American formula writing in this quintet of what might loosely be called fantasy novels. Billington and Gentle win the critical plaudits, but Brooks, Kerr and Wurts will surely win the financial race in terms of sales.

Rachel Billington's *Theo and Matilda* begins in the eighth century and concludes in the present. In an evocative blend of fantasy and historical fiction, five different, yet similar Theos and Matildas enact their love story at the one location, which is alternately a monastery, a Victorian mansion and a new housing estate. Billington quotes T. S. Eliot that 'to be conscious is not to be in time', and thus presumably argues that history can be made to stand still or be transcended.

Mary Gentle produces a 'baroque time of the heart', to quote her text, in *Rats and Gargoyles* which, like Edmund White's *Caracole* (1985), is a blend of exotic imagination and solid historical scholarship. Gentle mixes a quasi-Renaissance city-state with technologies from the nineteenth century, such as steam trains and airships. This is a world, however, in which the power hierarchy is intriguingly strange. Stone gods rule an aristocracy of full-sized rodents who, in turn, subjugate the human servant class. Gentle's main character, Prince Lucas, acts as a focus, often a bewildered one, for the multiplicity of events that occur in the sprawling city that teems with bizarre life. The impact of Gentle's fantastic visions is only marred by a 'genteel' conclusion of some sentimentality.

The quirkiness of Billington and Gentle stands in striking contrast to the production-line novels of Brooks, Kerr and Wurts. *The Scions of Shannara* is the first of a new trilogy from Brooks, and follows his very sucessful, albeit Tolkien-clone trilogy, *The Sword of Shannara*. Kerr's *Dragonspell* is the fourth in her 'Deverry' series, of which at least seven are scheduled for publication, while *Shadowfane* concludes Janny Wurts's 'Cycle of Fire' trilogy. A quantitative output never troubles fantasy publishers and fans!

The least original in concept and writing, Brooks's *The Scions of Shannara*, has paradoxically been the most successful in America, topping the genre hardback lists. The fact that it proved more popular than Ursula Le Guin's *Tehanu*, the final volume of her classic 'Earthsea' series, is revealing in itself. Brooks's story of the descendants of the original heroes of *The Sword of Shannara* and their battle against the 'Shadowen — an evil beyond all imagining' is set against a medieval European setting of the 'Four-Lands'. Brooks thus provides a familiar setting for a routine quest saga that clearly appeals to a faithful and presumably youthful readership.

Kerr's world in *Dragonspell* is solidly based on Celtic myths and history, while Wurts infuses her feudal world with the elemental forces of wind, water, fire and earth. In *Shadowfane*, Wurts's young hero, Jaric, must release the imprisoned Stormwarden and overcome the forces of evil. This is a more focused series than Kerr's sprawling saga in which more and more characters participate in side plots and the battle between darkness and light. Wurts's Jaric stands as a symbol for most of fantasy literature's heroes. Mental and physical self-sacrifices are required in order to win through. Knowledge gained has to be accompanied by responsibility. The battle of survival, however, is an ongoing one — which is just as well for American writers, or their relentless output would come to a grinding halt!

— Colin Steele, 1989–90

(continued from page 18)

The story is divided into three basic narratives that run concurrently in short chapters: those of Olmy, who encounters a Trojan-horse Jart (the alien Jarts were deadly enemies of the human builders of the Way in *Eon*); of Lanier and Korzenowski, called to the deconstructive task by an avatar of the Russian, Mirsky, who had journeyed to the ends of time; and of Rhia, the granddaughter of Patria Vasquez, the mathematical genius of *Eon*, who had been provided with a look-alike Earth, Gaia, to replace the one in which she lost her husband.

Only Rhia's story gives much refreshment to the reader, by offering the spectacle of a Hellenized, mechanized Egypt undisturbed by the premature death of Alexander the Great, before she becomes involved in the incomprehensibilities of personality division associated with Jart interference.

In the farther reaches of his imagination, Bear struggles to provide a physics of 'immaterial' immortality, of universes without exteriors, and succeeds only in writing nonsense. It is hard to make any sense out of such a sentence as this: 'The singularity was in some respects more *real* than the Way itself; but few humans could comprehend that kind of reality.'

In *Eternity*, Bear reads like Arthur C. Clarke, with whom he has several ideas in common, but at half the pace and twice the length. Indeed, Bear's style is so plodding, for the most part, that his proof-readers fell asleep and allowed him to commit gross typos on several pages; even apparently causing him to invent a new Egyptian god called Asclepis, when 'a Serapis' would appear first to have been meant (page 390).

AT WINTER'S END
by Robert Silverberg
Gollancz 575-04273-7;
1988; 404 pp.; £11.95

Silverberg's new saga challenges comparison, by its theme, with Brian Aldiss's *Helliconia Spring*. It will not disappoint fans of Silverberg's writing the way the Helliconia trilogy dismayed some who found the austerities of Aldiss's epic too severe for their taste. However, it lacks the grandeur of the Aldiss work, and the preconditions of its setting have clearly not been thought through with comparable rigour. (How did those unmodified monkeys survive?)

Nevertheless, this story of a small tribe emerging from a cocoon of hibernation after untold generations, finding a wonderful city and strange creatures, experiencing a crisis of identity and discovering a continuing purpose, has enough interest to sustain the reader. The main character, Hresh, is engaging (and in the right manner, racially speaking, which is not usually the case). The final battle crisis is too arbitrarily contrived and too easy resolved, but at least it has the great advantage of being despatched with brevity.

— Michael J. Tolley, April 1990

CRITICANTO

Elaine Cochrane :: Greg Hills :: Doug Barbour

Low key, understated and gently witty

Elaine Cochrane reviews:

FUTURES PAST
by James White
(1988, originally published 1982;
Orbit 7088-8250-1;
228 pp.; £2.50/$A8.95)

Like most sf writers, James White believes that humans are often selfish, greedy, aggressive, bigoted. Where he differs from so many is that he acknowledges that humans are also social animals, and that therefore co- operation, empathy and altruism are just as intrinsically human qualities. Take 'Custom Fitting', the first story in this volume. Scrennagle of Dutha, a centaur-like alien, is to present his credentials as ambassador at Court; the Foreign Office selects tailor George L. Hewitt to clothe him for the occasion. To the Foreign Office Scrennagle's body is more or less like that of a horse and that is how he should be dressed, but what would the Foreign Office know about clothes? To a tailor, clothes cannot be separated from the occasion on which they are to be worn and the role of the person — or centaur — who is to wear them. On Hewitt's sensitive handling of his assignment rests the galaxy- wide reputation of our planet.

Take also 'Outrider'. A freak accident has stripped a spacecraft of all its sensing and communications equipment; it has suffered little other damage. If crew and passengers are to survive, a way has to be found to land the deaf, dumb, blind craft on Earth. A lesser writer than White would have invented fantastic gadgetry from a few bits of wire or gloried in the spine-chilling exploits of the hero. White does neither. He has a hero who does perform spine- chilling exploits, but the story is about the man, not the deeds.

White's writing style is like his stories: low-key, understated, and gently witty. He is a delight to read. 'Custom Fitting' has one of my favourite passages:

> 'Thank you, sir,' said the workman in the tones of a senior public servant who is addressing a lowly member of the public he serves, then he turned away.

Co-operation, altruism and empathy do not make for gosh-wow pyrotechnics, and White's stories do not dazzle. Nor, however, do they leave you with a comfortable warm glow. Very often it is a single, simple action that determines, for example, how the alien contact will turn out, and that action is as often a matter of chance as it is of conscious good will. The outcomes are never inevitable.

The eleven stories in this collection do vary in quality. Many were first published in the 1950s, and a few of these show their age. White could not be expected to anticipate the technological and political changes that make 'Assisted Passage' (1953) so quaint. Nor, perhaps, should he be blamed for not anticipating social changes which mean that spaceship crews will not necessarily be male. The character of Dr Townsley in 'Outrider' (1955) absolves him of the crime of believing that women are incapable, but leaves him charged with the belief that we are, like Dr Townsley, peripheral. This does not in the slightest stop me enjoying White's work.

Top writers go Berserker

Greg Hills reviews:

BERSERKER BASE
edited by Fred Saberhagen
(VGSF 575-04453-5;
1990, first published 1985;
316 pp.; £3.99/$A9.95).

As a long-time reader of Fred Saberhagen's 'Berserker' series, I was pleased to hear of a new 'Berserker' novel. I was somewhat disappointed, therefore, to learn that *Berserker Base* was no more than a collection of stories by other authors, set in the 'Berserker' universe. The disappointment did not last long, however, because Saberhagen has worked hard on the collection, merging the set into something that is, if not a novel, at least a connected series.

The premise is that a small group of humans and friendly aliens have been captured by the Berserkers and brought back to a secret asteroid base, where the controlling Berserker intelligence combines human and alien minds with mechanical links to form an entity able to oversee events occurring far away, at speeds and with precision far exceeding those available to normal methods of communication. These characters appear in linking passages between the stories, and serve to provide continuity from one story to the next. The stories thus become anecdotes in the larger structure — that is, a 'fix-up', a technique often used by authors to make their own sets of stories into novels.

The stories, in order of appearance, are 'What Makes Us Human' by Stephen Donaldson, 'With Friends Like These' by Connie Willis, 'Itself Surprised' by Roger Zelazny, 'Deathwomb' by Poul Anderson, 'Pilots of the Teardrop' by Ed Bryant, and 'A Teardrop Falls' by Larry Niven.

The copyright dates are spread between 1983 and 1985. It is evident that the 1983 and 1984 dates represent separate publication by the individual authors, revealing a rather long gestation period for the book. At least one of the stories – 'A Teardrop Falls' – I have read before, in *Limits* (1985), with Larry Niven's explanation of how it came to be written:

> In 1983, Fred Saberhagen wrote to me with a strange proposal. How would I like to write a 'Berserker' story?
>
> The idea: Fred will ask half a dozen friends to write tales of human–Berserker encounters. Fred will shuffle them into the order he likes, and write a beginning and an ending to turn it all into a novel.
>
> *Sure* I wanted to write a 'Berserker' story! I didn't have to do any research; it was all in my head. I've been reading them long enough. I wrote 'A Teardrop Falls' and sent copies to Fred and to *Omni*, which bought it for an indecently large sum considering that I hadn't even built my own background.
>
> I've since seen other 'Berserker' pastiches in the magazines, and I await the novel with some eagerness.

So *Berserker Base* is that 'novel', and Niven's eagerness is answered at last. But was it worth the wait?

In 'What Makes Us Human', a 'generation ship' is found by a wandering Berserker. Most of the human occupants are in frozen sleep; the two crew members are left to struggle with an imponderable problem on their own. The Berserker is both faster and more manoeuvrable than the human vessel; fortunately the latter has a special defensive screen that protects it from many forms of attack, so the Berserker cannot easily destroy it. However, destruction is inevitable, unless the humans can find a way to destroy the Berserker instead.

In 'With Friends Like These', two humans on a backward alien world face a damaged Berserker that wants to use their resources to repair itself. Saving themselves and their less-than-co-operative alien charges forms the basis of the story, while Connie Willis considers the frailties and stupidities to which intelligence of all types is prey.

In 'Itself Surprised', a human ship finds an old, old alien relic that contains a damaged but repairable mechanical brain. The dilemma: repair it and maybe learn something of interest, or destroy it as possibly being part of a Berserker and therefore potentially deadly? The complication: a Berserker on a routine mission spots the human ship and detects something unusual about something it is carrying. It alters course and demands that the humans surrender their prize or be destroyed. Possibly the worst story in the book, over-written and containing poor assumptions about the possibilities for repairing the relic, nevertheless it contains the germ of a fascinating new line of development for the 'Berserker' series. Until now, the Berserkers' creators have not been explored in the series, and I would like to know more about them.

In 'Deathwomb', a trap has been set for a Berserker: a human colony wants to capture a Berserker brain more or less intact in order to learn more about the Berserkers. Unfortunately, nobody tells the people living on the trap.

In 'Pilots of the Twilight', two human worlds have been locked in somewhat stylized combat for generations. A Berserker enters, stage left, to sterilize them. Unfortunately, it starts with the wrong world: the remaining world has time to find a way of destroying the destroyer.

Finally, in 'A Teardrop Falls' a human has been recorded into a computer as a self-aware self-replicating program. The computer is located on the larger moon of a world that is being terraformed. A Berserker arrives and destroys the life on the world by dropping the lesser moon onto it. The human program must now attempt to lure the Berserker into opening a channel by which the human program can take over the Berserker.

In the matrix written by Saberhagen, humans and alien 'Carmpan' are joined in pairs via a mechanical interface to form a gestalt capable of seeing things occurring far away, so that the base's controlling Berserker mind can follow the progress of its offspring with an immediacy not available by normal methods. But it gets more than it bargained for: the gestalt is capable of two-way communication with the distant events, and is also able to conceal information from the Berserker. Finally the book ends with a joint attack on the base by three human fleets from the worlds contacted by the gestalt, supplemented by a cameo appearance by characters from other stories.

The format works well, and most of the stories fit snugly into the style of Saberhagen's own creations. One of the worst fits – 'What Makes Us Human' – has a problem with chronology, which Saberhagen obviously appreciated, because he has his characters comment on it in the subsequent interleaving chapter:

> 'Thousands of years?' Lars, as he asked the question, was still lying helplessly flat on his back, still attached to the mind-probing machine. . . . 'Thousands of years? Their colony was that old, really?' . . . Lars felt his Carmpan partner touch his mind . . . one more thought came through: *The path of the colonising ship from Earth to Aster, deviating from flightspace, may have undergone relativistic distortion, sending the ship into the Galactic past. But the contact we have just experienced was in our present.*

This passage gives some idea of how Saberhagen reconciles the ideas and events in the stories. Those who have followed the Berserkers in their rampage

through the Galaxy will want to read this book. Those who dislike Saberhagen's writing may want to read it for the other authors whose stories are here. And those who have never read a 'Berserker' story will find in the book a sampler for a series whose followers include the authors who wrote the stories presented here – surely some kind of recommendation for the series?

Paraliterature

Doug Barbour reviews:

STARS IN MY POCKET LIKE GRAINS OF SAND
by Samuel R. Delany
(Bantam 553-05053-2; 1984; 368 pp.; US$16.95)

Passionately intellectual, astonishingly inventive and grandly visionary, Samuel R. Delany's first sf novel in almost ten years, *Stars in My Pocket like Grains of Sand*, towers over almost all that passes for science fiction these days. I have no doubt that it will take its place as one of the genuinely innovative works in this 'paraliterary' field. And make no mistake, it is pure science fiction, despite the fact that Delany's erudition in both the arts and sciences, his knowledgeable use of the conventions of fiction and sf, his thorough awareness of the forms of narrativity and his complex stylistic gestures align his writing with the work of such writers as Barth, Borges, Calvino, Marquez and others of that ilk.

Delany, as his many critical and theoretical essays on this 'paraliterature' argue, believes in the artistic potential of sf, but he also believes that potential has seldom been sought by most writers in the field, let alone attained. Therefore he has created in *Stars in My Pocket like Grains of Sand* a work that makes real demands on its readers, assuming in them both desire and willingness to read a complex, difficult text and a thorough knowledge of the conventions of science fiction. As Michael Bishop says, the novel displays a 'genius that so thoroughly understands the major metaphors of contemporary science fiction that it can extend, deepen, alter, and ultimately transcend those familiar tropes in a narrative as urgent and complex as a news bulletin from the Middle East or Northern Ireland'.

As Delany has argued, no matter how far in the future an sf story is set, it is ultimately 'about' the world its writer and his original readers live in. This novel is set in a very far future, when humanity lives on some 6000 worlds scattered across the known universe, sometimes in co-existence with alien native races, yet Delany's narrative engages some of the most important questions presently studied by the so-called human sciences. It does not surprise me to find Umberto Eco writing in praise of Delany on the cover of Delany's latest Neveryöna book, for both it and *Stars in My Pocket* – and in this they share many conceptual grounds with Eco's bestselling *The Name of the Rose* – are studies in signs and communication.

In the powerful Prologue to ars, Delany movingly demonstrates the human importance of knowledge and aesthetic understanding when he shows one of his main characters, a mind utterly bereft of any culture or learning, encountering works of literature and comprehending them via technology for the first time. It is a stunning piece of writing, for Delany both establishes the power, beauty, intertextuality and value of the fictional future works that Rat Korga 'reads' and convincingly portrays Rat's awakening to their qualities. But, as a 'slave' on a world afraid of knwledge, he is stripped of his newfound understanding until, years later, he becomes the sole survivor of the destruction of his home world.

At which point, the novel proper: narrated by an Industrial Diplomat who moves among many worlds – and who tells us that worlds are very big places, full of many different cultures (the connection to our present understanding of our own world) – and who presents 'her' meeting with Rat and what ensues. But Marq Dyeth presents much more than that, for Delany has imagined his complex future in incredible detail, and has then found a narrative style whose various personal and social idioms contain immense arrays of information about the many different cultures in this far-future civilization. That the whole civilization is overseen by a shadowy Web, which controls the movement of information, and that on the many worlds an epic mostly hidden battle is being fought between the forces of the Family and those of the Sygn (and that spelling is only one of many indications of how thoroughly the ideas of Derrida and Lacan infuse and inform this work), and that Marq and Rat are 'perfect erotic objects' for each other (and that both are male), and Delany has devised a system of sexual reference in the pronouns that simply deconstructs the inherent sexism of English, are only some of the clues to how carefully Delany has woven his own multiplex textus in this novel.

There are few adventures of the kind found in so much conventional sf, yet Delany can turn an 'ordinary' formal dinner into an adventure of discovery for both his main characters and his readers. Because his future civilization is grounded in the flow of information – and the battle lines between Family and Sygn are drawn precisely at the point of meeting between the former's fear of and the latter's desire for the free flow of information to everyone – his novel is an attempt to let us feel what living in a society with the technology to access information – and often information needed only for the present – directly by mind–machine contact would be like.

There is simply too much happening in *Stars in My Pocket* for me to list it all. Delany plays elegant variations on all his old themes, he explores many nuances, and he creates some fascinating and alien characters. And there is suspense. Worlds hang in the balance, yet never in the usual fashion of conventional adventure sf.

The only problem with this book is that it is the first volume of a diptych, and the second volume still has not been published. *Stars* is a wholly satis-

fying tale in itself; however, it does whet the appetite for the next volume.

A world to lose yourself in

Doug Barbour reviews:

TIGANA
by Guy Gavriel Kay
(1990; RoC Books; 688 pp.)

I find it had to imagine that any other high fantasy published this year — or for the next few if it comes to that — will come close to matching Guy Gavriel Kay's massive and massively satisfying new novel *Tigana*. While the ever more poorly cloned versions of Tolkien's original great vision pour out of the publishing houses offering ever-decreasing satisfaction to a growing mass of readers, Kay's work provides the real thing: a powerfully imagined, marvellously invented Other World in which great tales naturally occur.

Kay leapt to the front ranks of fantasy during the 1980s with his bestselling *The Fionavar Tapestry*. As far as I'm concerned, that complex and powerfully realized trilogy takes its place with a very few other works: *The Lord of the Rings*, the 'Earthsea' books and the 'Riddlemaster' trilogy. *Tigana* proves that *The Fionavar Tapestry* was no fluke; it is both a wonderful work in the high-fantasy tradition and full of touches that mark it as something new. Its mixture of the conventional and the unexpected provides some of its most telling satisfactions, but its depth of feeling and profundity of spirit offer the richest rewards to its readers.

Although an intriguing aside very late in *Tigana* suggests that its world is part of the larger universe of *The Fionavar Tapestry*, what is important about it is the fullness of invention that Kay brings to its creation. Although the narratives of *Tigana* all occur on the peninsula of 'the Palm', the other continents and empires of the world are accounted for (eight of the nine provinces of the Palm are ruled by tyrants from the two major empires, Ygrath and Barbadior) and provide some of the solid contextualization that such world- building demands. Not only does Kay describe the various provinces of the Palm, with their varied cultures and histories, but also tells of the specific Triad of one god and two goddesses which the whole Palm worships, as well as the other gods and goddesses of other parts of the world. Eanna, Adaon and Morian rule over sky, earth and the underground, and they are part of every aspect of people's lives. Here is mystery, and a magic that feels entirely natural. Kay creates a world that feels lived in without marring the landscape with a bunch of expository lumps.

It is, of course, the story that must finally make or mar an epic, and Kay has invented a marvellous variation on the familiar tale of revolt by a small underground against a tyranny. Twenty years before the novel begins, Brandin, King of Ygrath, invaded the Palm in order to secure a realm for his beloved younger son Stevan. But the Prince of Tigana, the proudest of all the proud provinces of the Palm, killed Stevan in battle, and Brandin, perhaps the most powerful sorcerer in the world, turned upon that province with utter hatred in his heart. Not only did he conquer it and destroy every material vestige of its culture and history, but he placed a monstrous curse upon it — the removal of all memory of it, even its name, from human knowledge. Only those born in Tigana before that time can hear its name or know the extent of their loss; no one else, except sorcerers and wizards upon whom the curse has no effect, can remember that Tigana once existed.

This is a powerful trope in this century of loss, and Kay plays it for all it's worth as he weaves two strangely entwined narratives into one large tapestry of love, loyalty and betrayal. In the one, the last Prince of Tigana slowly plots his revolt, travelling the peninsula looking for like-minded people who will comprehend, as he has slowly come to do, that all the provinces must learn to transcend their petty rivalries of the past and act together if they are to rid themselves of both tyrants. In the other, in his subtle and moving study of nobility and suffering, a woman from Tigana, who has lived only to kill Brandin, learns to love him despite his single-minded grief-directed pursuit of her homeland's extinction. This is a fantasy novel that refuses easy black–white, good–evil confrontations.

Devin, the young singer who discovers he's a Tiganan, is both emotionally youthful and intellectually mature, a man haunted and fulfilled by memory. When he learns of the curse, it seems the cruellest punishment possible. He provides an energetic and entertaining view of the slowly building conspiracy. Dianora, the woman of Tigana who was brought to the King's saishan to, as she then thought, fulfil her vow to assassinate him, is both intellectually and emotionally mature, and her knowledge of Brandin, compounded of love and fear, has finally divided her from herself. But her insight, coming as it does from a slight distance, helps to make Brandin a believably tragic figure.

Kay does not tell his story through these two alone; rather they provide the most consistent viewpoints in narratives that teem with richly realized characters whose inner lives we glimpse at times of intense action or feeling. All are interesting to varying degrees, and they move through these landscapes of love and war with an enviable solidity.

To say more about what actually happens in both narratives would deny you the rich delights of this fine fable. There are moments of high intrigue, moments of love and loss, moments of ordinary joy, in family or among friends. Indeed, one of the things that sets *Tigana* apart from most other fantasies is the way it marries the domestic to the epic and recognizes the former's importance to the latter.

As ever, there is an approximate descending order in these reviews of recently released books that might be of interest to SF and fantasy readers. Here are mainly books I like, because I don't have time to read books unless they appear enticing. For the sake of the perplexed (Patrick McGuire and others), I will include a little marker. Below that are the Books I Definitely Do Not Like.
As ever, a review here does not preclude a longer review later, or elsewhere. In fact, I should be writing those other reviews right now.
My column about sf non-fiction books appears in Van Ikin's *Science Fiction*.

THE GILLESPIE REPORT

by Bruce Gillespie

HOTHOUSE
by Brian Aldiss; introduction by Joseph Milicia (VGSF Classics 41; 575-04735-6; 1990, original publication 1962; xiv + 206 pp.; £3.99/$A11.95).

Hothouse is still my favourite science fiction novel. I won't repeat all the effusive things I've said about it in the past. In an excellent new introduction to the Gollancz SF Classics edition, Joseph Milicia of the University of Wisconsin points out that the *Hothouse* world is a nightmare world 'intensified by the disturbing sense that there is no place to wake up to. . . . Gren's journey takes him literally and symbolically from full daylight to near-night, as Aldiss makes tremendous imaginative use of the novel's "given" of a planet that does not revolve. . . . Though the vision of life on earth in *Hothouse* is predominantly sombre – alternately gruesome, sardonic and elegiac – the sheer cornucopian inventiveness of the novel, from the comic names to cosmic panoramas, is exhilarating, and its very excess gives the tale of exotic life forms and awesome dangers a special kind of unity.'

My favourite inventions are the tummy-belly men and the Heckler, which the editor of the first American edition wanted to leave out.

THE QUEST OF THE THREE WORLDS
by Cordwainer Smith; introduction by John J. Pierce (VGSF 575- 04125-0; 1989, original publication 1966; 184 pp.; £2.50/$A8.95)

THE INSTRUMENTALITY OF MANKIND
by Cordwainer Smith; timeline by John J. Pierce; introduction by Frederik Pohl (VGSF SF Classics 28; 575-04167-6; 1988, original publication 1979; 238 pp.; £3.50/$A11.95) (Gollancz 575-04459-4; 1989; 238 pp.; £11.95/$A32)

THE REDISCOVERY OF MAN
by Cordwainer Smith; timeline and introduction by John J. Pierce (VGSF Classics 25; 575-04165-X; 1988, original publication 1975; 378 pp.; £3.50/$11.95) (Gollancz 575-04352-0; 1988; 378 pp.; £11.95/$A32)

NORSTRILIA
by Cordwainer Smith (VGSF Classics 24; 575-04166-8; 1988, original publication 1975; 275 pp.; £2.95/$A7.95) (Gollancz 575-04235-4; 1988; 275 pp.; £10.95/$A29.95).

Gollancz, led by former managing director Malcolm Edwards, did sf a great service by reprinting all of Cordwainer Smith's work (except for two stories) in uniform hardback and paperback editions. Unfortunately, the change of ownership at Gollancz and the adoption of a new Australian distributor have meant that these editions were dumped in remainder shops around Melbourne, and might be no longer available. (Or there are thousands of them still lying around *somewhere*.)

In 1989 I talked about Smith (pseudonym of Dr Paul Linebarger, who died in 1966) to the Nova Mob, and the talk was reprinted in *Australian Science Fiction Review, Second Series*, No. 21, Spring 1989. Nothing much I can add to this – except to say that Smith, along with Vonnegut, Aldiss, Le Guin and a few others, was one of the few sf authors who *knew what he was doing*, word by word, sentence by sentence, paragraph by paragraph. The result is astonishing conciseness plus a disturbing fusion of the autobiographical and the exotic. The result still may seem over-exotic to many readers, especially stories such as 'The Dead Lady of Clown Town'. To many others, Smith conveys just that sense of the entirely alien that made us sf readers in the first place.

The only lapses here are (a) John J. Pierce's timeline for the future universe of the Instrumentality, often contradicted by evidence from the stories; and (b) second-rate passages, finished, it seems, by the author's wife, Genevieve Linebarger. They include the last few embarrassing chapters of *Norstrilia* and 'posthumous' Smith stories such as 'Queen of the Afternoon'.

A WIZARD OF EARTHSEA
by Ursula Le Guin (Gollancz 575-00717-6; 1989, original publication 1968; £9.95/$24.95

THE TOMBS OF ATUAN
by Ursula Le Guin (Gollancz 575-03325-8; 1989, original publication 1972; 160 pp.; £9.95/$A24.95)

THE FARTHEST SHORE
by Ursula Le Guin (Gollancz 575-03326-6; 1989, original publication 1973; 206 pp.; £9.95/$A24.95)

Here's where my system breaks down. I don't think *A Wizard of Earthsea* or *The Tombs of Atuan* are better novels than *Martian Time- Slip*, but I do think *The Farthest Shore* is the best fantasy book I've read, and therefore . . . well, you work it out. At the top end of the scale, it's hard to say which book is 'best'. Some, such as *The Farthest Shore*, have had a powerful effect on my life. Other books, such as *Martian Time- Slip*, I keep re-reading for pleasure (five times at last count).

How many other people were made aware of the beginnings of the ecology movement by reading the Earthsea trilogy? The balance of magical and natural forces found on Earthsea provides an exemplary metaphor for the balance we are now seeking between forces in our world. Preachy? Well, Ged gets preachy in *The Farthest Shore*, but he is also afflicted by massive melodramatic forces and personal doubts. In these books ideas are alive, wrestling within themselves and against each other. They are brought to life in images that remain 15 years after reading these books. I'm looking forward to reading the recently released *Tehanu*, the fourth (ho, ho) in the trilogy.

MARTIAN TIME-SLIP
by Philip K. Dick (VGSF Classics 42; 575-04710-0; 1990, original publication 1964; 220 pp.; £3.50/$A11.95)

Unfortunately this edition lacks the famous Brian Aldiss introduction (from the NEL SF Masters series of the mid-1970s), which tells you far more clearly than I could why *Martian Time-Slip* is a great novel. (This essay, 'Dick's Maledictory Web', appears in *This World and Nearer Ones*.)

Martian Time-Slip seems to have begun as a non-sf novel, since this planet resembles the desert towns of eastern California or Arizona more than any scientist's version of Mars. Its emphasis is also on marriage and power relationships, as in the non-sf novels. But the irrigated village of this Mars also contains a time-autistic boy who can see the future, the native Bleekmen who also seem to trek around in time, and numerous odd fragments of a possible twenty-first century gimcrack culture. The pitiless clarity of style and insight into human frailties owes more to the (then unpublished) non-sf novels of the 1950s than to sf, but the exuberance of ideas comes from sf at its best.

If Cordwainer Smith gets all the best first lines (see *ASFR* 21), Philip Dick gave himself one of the great last sentences: 'In the darkness of the Martian night her husband and father-in-law searched for Erna Steiner; their light flashed here and there, and their voices could be heard, business-like and competent and patient' (*Martian Time-Slip*, page 220).

BRING THE JUBILEE
by Ward Moore (Gollancz SF Classic 19; 575-04121-8; 1987, first publication 1952; 194 pp.; £3.50/$A11.95).

Bring the Jubilee is, along with Dick's *The Man in the High Castle*, the greatest 'alternate history' novel in science fiction. One of the top ten sf novels of all time (surely more than a 'minor classic' — David Pringle in *Science Fiction: The 100 Best Novels*), it tells of a 1950s America whose history has been shaped by South's winning the Civil War. The intricate alternate social history is brilliantly done but, like Dick's novel, gains power because its characters are interesting as well. Pringle, for instance, fails to note that Barbara Haggerwells is one of the few believable and memorable female characters in science fiction. The narrator, Hodge Backmaker, is one of those complex 'God's fool heroes' that turn up in sf occasionally. The book is full of crazy little details, interesting historical speculations, and people you'd be pleased to meet. I trust Gollancz will keep it in print.

THE LAND OF LAUGHS
by Jonathan Carroll (Legend 09-939260-7; 1989, first published 1980; 241 pp.; £3.50/$A9.95.

I read this book because of Dave Langford's general approval of Jonathan Carroll in *SFC* 68. What a find! This is one of those gripping novels whose plot I cannot reveal for fear of the reaction from enraged readers. I can tell you that the main character sets off in search of a famous fantasy writer, a writer who seems to have disappeared without trace. And then there's the girl who's also looking for him. And then there's the American mid-western small town that becomes the focus of their investigation. And that's all I can say. What emerges, disguised as a mystery story, is a meditation about the relationship between reader and writer. Any deconstructionist critic who claims that the reader is really the writer should consult Carroll to discover the meaning of such a claim.

VERY OLD MONEY
by Stanley Ellin (Andre Deutsch 233-97774-0; 1985; 312 pp.; £8.95/$A31.95).

Very Old Money is not a science fiction novel, but it resembles my idea of an sf novel better than most sf novels I've read. It is the last novel by the American writer Stanley Ellin (not Stanley Elkin). It tells the story of Michael and Amy Lloyd, two people with upwardly mobile ambitions and little income. They are so desperate that they answer an advertisement to become, respectively, chauffeur and personal attendant in the household of a fabulously wealthy and very discreet old New York family. *Very Old Money* resembles an sf novel in that

Amy and Michael Lloyd find themselves entering an alien environment. The agency warns them that the rules of behaviour for servants are prescribed but unwritten. In their first few days on the job, they must learn umpteen small codes of behaviour. If the Lloyds fail they know they will be out on their necks, broke. They succeed, in an ambiguous way.

Very Old Money is a pleasure to read because the reader is never quite sure what kind of book it is. On one level it is the story of learning to survive in an alien environment; on another level it is tracking down a mystery and being able to solve it just because you are the outsider.

THE WIND'S TWELVE QUARTERS
by Ursula Le Guin (VGSF Classics 37; 575-04607-4; 1989, first publication 1975; 303 pp.; £3.99/$A12.95).

When this book first appeared in 1975, it gave us all the best short fiction of Ursula Le Guin, the brightest sf star of that period. It was the most interesting collection of the mid-1970s, and it hasn't dated. What has dated, lurching back to the late 1930s, is sf itself. Le Guin's work has a careful sophistication, wry humour and moral fierceness that must sit uneasily with the post-*Star Wars* generation. Those of them who read. It's left to the general reading public to keep Le Guin's name alive, which might explain the choice of an elegant landscape-on-white-background cover for this edition. (Brian Waugh is the cover artist.) Le Guin has not yet reached Picador Books or Penguin English Library. Yet.

Particular favourites of mine here are 'The Stars Below', 'Direction of the Road', 'The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas' and 'The Day Before the Revolution'. 'Nine Lives' is also here, and 'Vaster than Empires and More Slow'.

LAVONDYSS: JOURNEY TO AN UNKNOWN REGION
by Robert Holdstock; illustrations by Alan Lee (Gollancz 575- 04374-1; 1988; 367 pp.; £11.95/$A29.95) (Morrow 0688-09185-7; 1989; 367 pp.; US$18.95)

The end of *Mythago Wood* obviously contains a pointer towards a sequel. It's refreshing to find that the 'sequel' is a separate and even more ambitious novel set in the Ryhope Wood that swallowed up the characters of the first volume. Tallis Keeton, sister of one of the characters from *Mythago Wood*, also sets off into the wood. What happens to her is not too clear to me, since time doubles back on itself, forming circles of glimpsed cause and effect. We are never quite sure what we are watching, or what the consequences will be. In other words, I'm glad nobody has asked me to write a long (or even a short) review of this book, since I'm not sure of what kind of experience I went through.

What I am sure of is the feeling of having struggled my way through the underbrush and stepped through its waterways. *Lavondyss*, like *Mythago Wood*, has the tactile quality that is missing in almost all 'epic fantasy'.

(Ralph Vaughan Williams gets a walk-on part at the beginning of *Lavondyss*. I'm not sure why, but it's a nice touch.)

BILL THE GALACTIC HERO
by Harry Harrison (VGSF 575-04701-1; 1990, original publication 1965; 160 pp.; £3.50/$A11.95).

Gollancz has recently gone in for paperback covers that can, at best, be described as unsubtle. *Bill the Galactic Hero*'s gives the idea that Bill was the original Terminator, Predator or Robocop. In the interests of truth in advertising, the designer has added a quotation from Terry Pratchett: 'Simply *the* funniest science fiction book ever written.' That's not true, either, although it's nearly true. *Bill the Galactic Hero* is funny because at heart it's very serious. Disguised originally as a novella in *Galaxy*, it was probably the first anti-Vietnam War fiction produced by an American writer. (But it is not even mentioned by H. Bruce Franklin in his article 'The Vietnam War as American SF and Fantasy' in *Science-Fiction Studies* 52.) *Bill the Galactic Hero* is deeply angry about the way silly wars fought a long way from home kill innocent people, but it also has a lot of sophisticated jokes.

FOUR HUNDRED BILLION STARS
by Paul J. McAuley (Gollancz 575-04260-5; 1988; 253 pp.; £11.95/$A32).

Four Hundred Billion Stars is original, even brilliant, but as in almost all sf, nothing in it is new. The originality is all in the rearrangement. The main character, Dorthy Yoshida, is a telepath who has been dumped by the armed forces on an outlying planet to help them defuse what they believe to be an alien weapon. Humans have never met the aliens; but they've had the aliens' weapons explode in their faces on another planet in another galaxy. The army believes the aliens are lurking on the newly discovered planet, and Dorthy is their main weapon. There is a lot of malarky and investigation, but the eventual discovery is that the planet has been terraformed to suit the alien, and that all the seemingly placid life forms on the planet are part of the alien's life cycle. Familiar stuff. The attraction of this book comes from the painstaking way in which Dorthy discovers bits of the puzzle. When you meet the alien at the end, the encounter is wonderfully ambivalent.

I like *Four Hundred Billion Stars* because McAuley provides a lot of convincing biological detail to give reality to his story, and because it has a sort of grim humour. He is very careful in the way he unfolds the clues to his mystery. And his final meaning is a nice parable about the triviality of self-important human activity.\

PUTTERING ABOUT IN A SMALL LAND
by Philip K. Dick (Academy Chicago Publishers 89733-149-4; 1985; 291 pp.; US$16.95/$A33.95)

THE MAN WHOSE TEETH WERE ALL EXACTLY ALIKE
by Philip K. Dick (Paladin 586-08563-7; 1984; 256 pp.; £2.95/$A8.95).

Since Phil Dick died in 1982, most of his non-sf books have been published, but in random order. With the help of Lawrence Sutin's *Divine Invasions: A Life of Philip K. Dick*, we can not only work out which year each was written (*Puttering* in 1957, *Teeth* in 1960), but to which collapsing marriage each refers.

But biography is beside the point. Dick showed the best of himself in his non-sf novels, and reading them changes our view of the sf books. I had always taken Dick for primarily an ideas-and-images writer, not a people writer. Occasionally in his sf he burst out with brilliant bits of characterization (Childan and Tagomi in *The Man in the High Castle*, Arnie Kott in *Martian Time-Slip*, and a few others), but they were all the more obvious for being exceptional.

The non-sf novels, however, are bravura bizarre comedies of people under stress. In both these books, I'm reminded more often of Maupassant or Flaubert than of Van Vogt. Not only is Dick's command of detail fearsome, but he shows a brilliant ability to swap effortlessly between the minds of his characters. In the sf novels, this switching between viewpoints often seems awkward. Not so in *Puttering About in a Small Land*. This is the tale of two similar couples who meet when they send their children to the same school. Roger Lindahl and Liz Bonner become intertwined; Virginia Lindahl uses this as a reason for taking over Roger's business and establishing it as a going concern. But more is going on – here you have a dissection of the whole Californian 'civilization' of the 1950s, a junk sculpture of desperate and separate people. Dick lets his people dance a weird psychological quadrille that must been far too honest for any publisher of the 1950s. The clinical, funny sex scenes alone must have prevented publication of this novel as it shuttled between uninterested publishers during the late fifties.

The Man Whose Teeth Is Exactly Alike is based on a period when Phil lived in a small coastal settlement, and is incidentally very nasty about the social atmosphere in small coastal settlements. If anything, the battle between husbands and wives is fought even more ferociously than in *Puttering*. Dick describes other disturbing currents in the life of Californians of the 1950s: in particular vicious, sterile racism. A chance incident sets off a knockdown battle between the Lombrosios (Italian immigrants some generations back) and the Runcibles (very much stigmatized as Jewish by everybody in the town). Both marriages are in terrible (often terribly funny) trouble. To blow up this comedy, Dick introduces an almost science-fictional gimmick, the discovery of a Neanderthal skull on a hillside.

It broke Phil's heart that his non-sf novels were not published in his lifetime, but he would have been doubly distressed to learn that these novels will never be popular. They are too truthful, too sarcastic, too hard. They need the giant loony metaphors of sf to make them memorable. But who knows? Maybe Michael Bishop is right, and it's only a twist of fate that gave us Philip Dick the sf writer rather than Philip Dick the realist chronicler of the 1950s in California.

MY LADY TONGUE AND OTHER TALES
by Lucy Sussex (William Heinemann Australia 85561-363-7; 1990; 280 pp.; $A14.95).

THE FORTUNES OF MARY FORTUNE
edited by Lucy Sussex (Penguin 14-012302-4; 230 pp.; $A12.99)

During a recent mini-boom in Australian sf publishing (more than two books in a year! wow!), Lucy Sussex has emerged as hottest newcomer. She has good sf ideas, a pernickety passion for fine detail and perfect pitch for people's voices. Her stories are often very funny. She is a merry ironist: amused by *all* human experience, and not just people and events that fit a private viewpoint. Her stories begin with the familiar and end up in the unfamiliar. My favourite story is 'God and Her Black Sense of Humour'. In this search for a couple of female vampires, the viewpoint character undertakes an unsettling pilgrimage among peculiar people spread across America. The story's 44 pages pack in a wider range of experience than most people's blockbuster trilogies. In 'Quartet in Death Minor', the main character sets off in pursuit of Death, who wanders past the house at night. Another fantasy story is 'The Lipton Village Society', which plays with the idea of the fantasy world into which everyday people can enter, but excludes the narrator.

I like the sf stories less than the fantasy stories, mainly because Sussex tends to project future societies dominated by one or other strand of today's counter culture. The effect looks trendy, although Sussex is rigorous in working out the consequences of her premises. 'Go-To' bogs down under the weight of its premise, that Animal Liberationists become far more aggressive than they are at the moment. The story is really about a cat. When the cat appears at the end, the story bursts into life. In 'My Lady Tongue', the viewpoint character lives in a feminist/lesbian utopia. In a vividly uneasy flashback, she tells of her one encounter with a man, a Shakespeare-spouting SNAG (Sensitive New Age Guy). It's not clear at the end whether she has learned anything from any of the events in the story; reading this story is like encountering a lesbian Robert Heinlein.

Two other powerful stories, 'The Man Hanged Upside Down' and 'Red Ochre', are technically fantasies, but have that rigorous sense of worked-out ideas that we usually associate with sf. They prove that Lucy Sussex is so accomplished that she can write anything she wants. Which direction will she take?

I mention here *The Fortunes of Mary Fortune* for those who will become collectors of Lucy Sussex's books. As part of a research project, she discovered the identity of a prolific Australian woman writer of detective stories who had written as 'W. W.' or 'Waif Wander'. She was Mary Fortune, who, apart from her 500 detective stories, used disguised incidents from her own life as the basis for a series of pieces for newspapers. Lucy Sussex has assembled these in two sections: 'The Memoirs' (of life on the gold diggings in the 1850s) and 'The Journalism' (about life in Melbourne during the 1870s). Lively on-the-spot journalism for fans of Australian history.

THE AFFIRMATION
by Christopher Priest (VGSF Classics 29; 575-04283-4; 1988, original publication 1981; 213 pp.; £2.99/$8.95).

At first *The Affirmation* seems to be about a man who can create an alternate world by writing about it. If that were so, I would say that Carroll's *The Land of Laughs* is the better novel. But *The Affirmation* is a slippery text. Its real proposition, I suspect (and the real proposition of all Priest's novels), is that by writing novels one creates alternate worlds whether one realizes it or not. At least one must take responsibility for the world in one's novel as surely as if you were given godlike powers to build it out of atoms. The convergence of the 'everyday' and the 'fantasy' worlds is presented powerfully in this book. Priest is one of the finest practioners of elegant English prose, and *The Affirmation* is one of his most memorable novels.

THE FALLING WOMAN
by Pat Murphy (Tor 812-54622-9; 1987, first published 1986; 283 pp.; US$3.95/$A6.95).

The best fantasy introduces uneasy or supernatural elements into scenes of mundane life, subtly changing the mundane into the exotic. In *The Falling Woman*, the scene of the action is both mundane and exotic: an archaeological dig on the remains of Mayan civilization in Central America. Pat Murphy knows her archaeology, giving an amusing portrait of the frustrations of camp life. Elizabeth Butler, the main character, encounters the ghosts of the people whose lives she is unearthing. One of them is Trying To Tell Her Something. Ghostly cityscapes begin to take shape among the trees. Some might find the ending a bit melodramatic, but few could fault the careful creation of the superstructure that provides its foundation. One of the few recent award winners (Hugo, as I remember) worthy of the honour.

THE FOUNTAINS OF PARADISE
by Arthur C. Clarke (VGSF Classics 34; 575-04590-6; 1989, first published 1979; 258 pp.; £3.50/$11.95).

The slapdash quality of Arthur Clarke's recent novels, both collaborations and those written under his own name, are likely to make people forget what a good writer he used to be. Take *The Fountains of Paradise* from 1979: the last good novel he wrote. At its simplest level, *The Fountains of Paradise* tells you little more than how to build a tower of beer cans to the moon. Or rather, a 'ladder' from the earth's surface to a geosynchronous orbiting satellite. The book is satisfying because it does not extend much beyond the original premise. Clarke doesn't muck around with melodramatic 'human interest' stuff (what sf writers so often call 'characterization'). He tells you, from the point of view of the fairly ordinary people involved, how you would go about a massive engineering task. Clarke's love for Sri Lanka, site of the project, and its mythology gives extra depth to the book.

QUICKENING AND OTHER STORIES
by Brian Matthews (McPhee Gribble/Penguin 14-012077-7; 1989; 215 pp.; $A11.99).

Only a few of these stories will interest sf and fantasy readers, but even those few stories show that in Australia the fantasy impulse is never entirely suppressed. Brian Matthews is a distinguished academic critic who also writes fine fiction.

The only one of these stories that might have appeared in *F&SF* is 'Encore'. You remember all those stories in which the main characters turn out to be Adam and Eve? Matthews chooses a different Old Testament story as his model. 'Encore' includes some evocative writing, as a familiar (if soggy) Australian scene dissolves into a legendary landscape.

'Dog Lovers' has a wild and loopy quality that one finds rarely in Australian fiction. It might have appeared in *Interzone* if Matthews had known of the existence of *Interzone*. Also surrealistic is 'The Funerals', which was praised by Australian reviewers for its originality, but could seem all too familiar to reders of early Ballard.

There is a certain kind of horror story that springs entirely from the horrible things so-called ordinary people can do to each other. 'The Norfolk Island Pine' is one of them, taking ordinary incidents so far down the black path that the reader cringes at the consequences.

It seems unlikely that Gardner Dozois or Datlow and Windling ever see stories by Brian Matthews and the small number of other Australian fantasists when compiling their 'Year's Best'. A pity.

A PURSUIT OF MIRACLES
by George Turner (Aphelion 1-875346-00-7; 1990; 209 pp.; $A12.95)

I wrote about George Turner's work for *ASFR* 24, Winter 1990. That talk was based on my speech that launched this book at the convention held at Easter 1990 in Melbourne. I realized later that in my speech I didn't talk much about *A Pursuit of Miracles*.

In the same issue of *ASFR*, John Foyster reviewed *A Pursuit of Miracles*. The final paragraph

of that review reads: 'And so we have a terribly mixed bag. Some stories look like refugees from George Turner's earliest days of writing, archaic in conception and execution, while a couple show that he could really become a skilled short story writer. But he *is* an accomplished novelist. Stick to the last, George Turner!'

And I would agree with Foyster if I didn't find these stories highly readable. Even Turner admits, in his introduction to 'In a Petri Dish Upstairs', that it is a 'novel topped and tailed'. 'On the Nursery Floor' is so compressed that it cries out for the novel version that Turner has now written. (*Nursery Games* should appear some time next year. But these stories read just as well as 'A Pursuit of Miracles' and 'Feedback', whose structures are much more like those of the traditional short story.

If you like George Turner's forthright, gritty style, you will like *A Pursuit of Miracles* as much as most of his novels. But even while you enjoy 'The Fittest', one of the best Australian short stories of the 1980s, you will remember how much better it became when transformed into *The Sea and Summer*.

TAU ZERO
by Poul Anderson (VGSF Classics 38; 575-04617-1; 1989, first publication 1971; 190 pp.; £3.50/$A11.95).

When *Tau Zero* first appeared in 1971, it stimulated heated discussions about its merit. Do the rotten boring 'people bits' (about the inhabitants of a spaceship constantly accelerating to near-light speed) detract from the 'science bits' (about the physics of the relationship between the spaceship and the universe outside)? Or are the science bits so brilliant that they make us forget Anderson's laughable attempts at 'characterization'? I have a vague memory of arguing the first position in 1971. Sandra Miesel argued that Anderson writes well about people. Today I remember the book with some affection, because (a) the 'science bits' are the best pieces of writing ever seen from Anderson; and (b) *Tau Zero* is one of the few sf novels or stories to take seriously the uncomfortable fact that nobody will ever travel at or beyond the speed of light.

DOWNWARD TO THE EARTH
by Robert Silverberg (VGSF Classics 40; 575-04734-8; 1990, first publication 1971; 190 pp.; £3.50/$A11.95).

During the late 1960s and early 1970s Robert Silverberg was trying to become a Great Novelist, or at least Highly Respected. The results of his efforts were often hard to take seriously, even as sf books, but *Downward to the Earth* had a credibility that eluded most of the others. Part of the book's appeal is its unabashed tribute to Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. Silverberg builds onto that superstructure a sombre adventure of exploring an alien culture.

In *Science Fiction: The 100 Best Novels*, David Pringle summarizes *Downward to the Earth* better than I can: 'The alien jungles and plateux are very well described, and there are several pieces of memorable grotesquerie: the "milking" of serpents; the ritual dances of the elephantine *nildoror*; an unfortunate couple from Earth who have become horribly infested by alien parasites; and the climactic scenes set inside the mountain of rebirth, where Gundersen is eventually vouchsafed a vision of the meaning of life.'

RIA
by Felix C. Forrest (Twindz Publishing 9618918-0-7; 1987, first published 1947; 242 pp.; US$19.95/$A26.95).

'Felix C. Forrest' was Dr Paul Linebarger, better known as 'Cordwainer Smith'. *Ria* was published not long before the appearance of the first Smith story, but it seems to have been written before World War II. Thanks to Twindz Publishing (of 'Minneapolis, Minnesota'; no street address given) for this beautiful package of a book. The novel itself does not overwhelm us in the way the best Smith stories do. As Forrest, Linebarger seems still too much influenced by the major inter-war European writers; there are only glimpses of his own later style.

What strikes the reader of *Ria* is its European quality, as opposed to the oriental quality of the Smith tales. Ria Regardie Browne — an American princess, daughter of the only rich civilization between the wars — remembers a summer she spent in the resort town of Bad Cristi, and the murder she witnessed there. The novel is a combination of moody introspection and mountain scenery, with some very fine sentences glinting in the velvet ('All she had to do was waggle her legs in the motion called walking, and the whole Earth planet obediently shifted beneath her'). There is only one action sequence, which is probably why nobody but Smith fans remains interested in the book. This is not essential reading (as is the Smith material in *ASFR* 21, or Linebarger's *Psychological Warfare* would be if I could find a copy), but it's more accomplished than most people's beginner novels.

THIS IS THE WAY THE WORLD ENDS
by James Morrow (Ace 441-80711-9; 1989, original publication 1986; 270 pp.; US$3.95/$A8.95).

Elaine Cochrane and I showed different views of this book in *SFC* 67 — and Damien Broderick disagreed with both of us in the letter column of *SFC* 68. It's not a great book, but it keeps wriggling away in the memory. This Ace paperback is the most recent edition I've received.

EQUAL RITES
by Terry Pratchett (Gollancz 575-03950-7; 1987; 200 pp.; £9.95/$A25.95).

Until Dave Langford praised Terry Pratchett in his 'Critical Hits' column in *SFC* 68, I had taken little notice of the man's books. I was put off by the over-enthusiastic Josh Kirby covers.

Equal Rites is my first Terry Pratchett book! Reading it was a slightly different experience from what I expected. A Douglas Adams of fantasy? Not really. Much gentler stuff, and a lot of inventions that are not merely satirical references to other fantasy books. Pratchett writes lots of in-jokes and pratfalls, but occasionally he lets down his guard and writes paragraphs of amazing beauty. Pratchett loves his Discworld, whereas Adams is merely out of love with our own world. Pratchett's world is not merely a stage set, but is there for roaming in.

Why not place *Equal Rites* further up the list? Because at the story's end the farce takes over from the sense of wonder. The last few chapters are chaotic. At the age of eight I liked breathless endings when Enid Blyton wrote them; now I ho-hum when the characters fall over themselves.

LAKE OF THE SUN
by Wynne Whiteford (Ace 441-46991-4; 1989; 249 pp.; US$3.50/$A8.95)

THE SPECIALIST
by Wynne Whiteford (Ace 441-77789-9; 1990; 246 pp.; US$3.95/$A9.95).

A puzzle for 1990: if *Lake of the Sun* and *The Specialist* show no sign of original ideas or settings, why are they two of the most enjoyable books I've read all year? Both books seem to be deliberately oldfashioned: they are set on Mars (although, puzzlingly, different Marses), meander along like an old Murray Leinster novel, and feature strong space-suited heroes who make just the kind of discoveries found in sf books of the 1930s. The result should be tedious, but isn't.

Whiteford takes no short cuts. He inhabits his stories. He provides enough detail to bring his characters and settings to life. Mars in either book might be a variation on the same old desert Mars, but we feel we've travelled there. The heroes may be competent, but they don't indulge in histrionics. There are no villains, only a few people who've got things wrong. This is the modern equivalent of the British Middlebrow Novel of the 1930s, and it works.

In *Lake of the Sun*, the explorers from Earth meet the people who already live on Mars far underground in caves containing pockets of breathable air. The landing of people from Earth prompts a political crisis that had been gathering force among the two races of Martians (one race is one-eyed). The action takes place entirely in terms of people's believable reactions to misunderstood situations. No *deus ex machina*. Nothing silly at all, but some satisfying action, including an eery trek through twilit caverns.

Whiteford's writing signature is his interest in malformed variants of the human race. In *The Specialist* he presents a number of people whose bodies have become transformed for space flight or living on Mars. In turn, the people of Mars regard the people of Earth as beyond contempt. As the blurb intones: 'Lance Griffith, star reporter for the *Solar News*, came to Mars for the scoop of a lifetime: evidence of a visitor from beyond the stars.' Nobody on Mars welcomes him, several people try to kill him, and the answer to the mystery is far more complicated than you would suspect from reading the first half of the book. *The Specialist* relies on a series of vivid images rather than memorable personalities, but the drama is played out entirely in human terms. It's a good read, perhaps better suited to genteel fans of well-wrought mystery novels than to the jaded aficionados of today's techno-pop sf.

STRIPED HOLES
by Damien Broderick (Avon 380-7577; 1988; 181 pp.; US$2.95/$A5.95) (Mandarin Australia 1-86330-032-5; 1990; 179 pp.; $A12.95).

Recently Mandarin Australia began the project of reprinting Damien Broderick's works for an Australian readership. Some of Broderick's books have been available in limited editions here, and others have been published overseas and imported only to the specialist sf bookshops. Here is remedy for neglect.

Of the books released so far in the Mandarin series, *Striped Holes* has been the most successful. It's not hard to see why. It has an elegant and amusing cover showing the cheeky alien who appears at the beginning of the book. The back-cover blurb mentions Monty Python and Douglas Adams. And the prose is amusing and attractive. (The first sentence: 'The time machine that materialized in the middle of the living room of Sopwith Hammil's rather nice bachelor apartment looked like a two-meter loaf of sliced bread.')

If I feel uneasy with this book, it's because of the constant over-the-shoulder glances at the work of Douglas Adams. There are two many little lectures, Adams- style, and roundabout jokes that are not quite funny enough. *Striped Holes* comes into its own as soon as Broderick leaves Adams territory, as soon as he forgets the form and makes Broderick jokes and Melbourne references. (There is even a Franco Cozzo joke.)

My favourite character is George Bone. He happens to be God, and O'Flaherty the astrologer meets him on an Australian Airlines flight. How George Bone became God, and what he does with this power, forms the backbone of the book. O'-Flaherty to God: 'Oh yes, I'm most impressed. I never really thought of the creator of the universe having high ethical standards.'

DREAMSNAKE
by Vonda N. McIntyre (VGSF Classics 33; 575-04497-7; 1989, original publication 1978; 313 pp.; £3.50/$11.95).

Dreamsnake has faded from my memory since I read it twelve years ago, but the images I retain from it are pleasant ones. McIntyre puts a small number of people on a simplified planet, and lets them solve a simple mystery — which doesn't explain why this was a good read at the time. (But surely *Dreamsnake* is no longer an sf classic?) The book's success owes much to its clear, vivid style and lack of pretension. Readers liked the charac-

ters here, and the world, and they were not bludgeoned over the head for their trouble. But perhaps some of McIntyre's shorter works from the same period should be kept in print as well.

THE TOTAL DEVOTION MACHINE AND OTHER STORIES
by Rosaleen Love (Women's Press 7043-4188-3; 1989; 167 pp.; £4.50/$A14.95).

In *ASFR* 24 Yvonne Rousseau examines this book in so much detail that her review is as long as some of its shorter stories. I point to such a review with awe, but can no longer write pieces of such detail and length. Rousseau makes sense of much that eluded me in the volume: its unlikely combination of farce, seriousness and scientific extrapolation. I was reminded more often of Sheckley and Vonnegut than of anybody currently working in sf. Another useful comparison might be with the works of Angela Carter. 'If You Go Down to the Park Today' is the kind of dazzling scientific fantasy that I've rarely seen (except from Angela Carter) since the great days of *New Worlds* magazine in the late 1960s.

Rosaleen Love, who earns her living as a lecturer in history and philosophy of science at Melbourne's Swinburne Institute, is an uneasy original. To me, she still has not found satisfactory form for her originality. Ideas glare out from stories. Characters are ferociously isolated. Only a few stories are long enough to involve me. Emotions have still not quite caught up with thoughts. But the thoughts are never dull.

ZENITH: THE BEST IN NEW BRITISH SCIENCE FICTION
edited by David S. Garnett (Sphere 7474-0341-4; 1989; 298 pp.; £3.50/$A9.99).

If *Zenith* really is presenting the best, surely new British sf is dying of dullness? Yes, there is are some good stories, but only Barrington J. Bayley's 'Death Ship', oldfashioned loony metaphysical adventure, has any zest to it. Lisa Tuttle's 'In Translation' is a minor masterpiece of cold analysis of what might happen to ordinary people when the aliens come — but it *is* chilly. 'Time of the Tree' is effective, but pretty much the kind of primitive pastoral we've come to expect from Robert Holdstock. I'm not sure whether William King's 'Skyrider' is New Wave or cyberpunk; it works well enough, but I could easily forget it soon.

These writers present themselves in exemplary grey prose. Let's hope they brighten up their wardrobe and start strutting again.

GALAXIES LIKE GRAINS OF SAND
by Brian Aldiss; introduction by Norman Spinrad (VGSF Classics 36; 575-04180-3; 1989, original publication in 1960; 188 pp.; £2.99/$A8.95).

It is almost exactly twenty years since I read the first American edition of this book, and I don't remember any of the stories in particular. They come from early in Aldiss's career. I do recall the 'Stapledonian' feeling that Spinrad mentions in his Introduction. To whet your interest in the current volume, I quote Brian Aldiss's Author's Note: 'In Britain, the expository narrative, on which I set great store, was discarded, and some of the stories were published separately as *The Canopy of Time*. In America, the book fared better, but nevertheless some of the stories and part of the narrative were discarded, to make a paperback volume called *Galaxies Like Grains of Sand*. This latter volume was eventually reprinted in the States in hardcover, with an Introduction by Norman Spinrad. This edition follows the American hardcover edition with two exceptions: Spinrad has kindly revised his Introduction for the English market, and one of the original stories, "Blighted Profile", has been reinserted in its correct place in the narrative. This is a completely rewritten version of the story and its expository material is new. So this edition . . . most nearly conforms to my original intentions. . . .'

THE PEACE GARDEN
by Lucy Sussex; illustrated by Rolf Heimann (Oxford University Press 19-554909-0; 101 pp.; $A15.95).

I quote my review from *The Melbourne Report*, April 1990: '*The Peace Garden* is . . . a promising first novel, a piece that I suspect hints at much better novels to come. [It] is a novel for older children, attractively illustrated by Rolf Heimann. Eleven-year-old Holly, staying the summer in the country with her mother and new stepfather, discovers a mysterious, neglected garden and a motley collection of new friends. Most of these friends have been called hopeless or unattractive by the locals; for Holly they are allies in attempting to save the garden from being "re-developed" by a local businessman. The plot of *The Peace Garden* is predictable, and the ending will surprise no one. It is worth reading mainly because of the brio and panache of Sussex's style. There is no dullness or flab here; every sentence sparkles because the author knows what she wants to do with every word. . . . only a complex idea is missing.' There is a slight fantasy element in the book, which is why I mention it here. And, of course, Lucy Sussex's next book was *My Lady Tongue and Other Stories*, which appears towards the top of this column.

THE GREY PRINCE
by Jack Vance (VGSF 575-04646-5; 1990, first publication 1974; 160 pp.; £3.50/$A11.95).

This is second-order Jack Vance, which is better than many writers' first order. In keeping with its title, it's a pale shadow of the 'Alastor' books, which appeared about the same time, and the 'Durdane' books from the late 1960s.

¶ = the symbol I promised as a guide to Patrick McGuire and others. Above this symbol are books I like; below this symbol are Books About Which I Have Grave Doubts.

BUYING TIME
by Joe Haldeman (Morrow 688-07244-5; 1989; 300 pp.; US$18.95/$A27.50).

I suspect I'm being unkind to *Buying Time* because I enjoyed *Tool of the Trade* (see my review in *SFC* 67), and expected something as good. Haldeman still tells an adventure yarn effectively, but in this book he loses his sense of irony. The assumptions that underpin this book are sickening. Yes, you can have immortality. But you must pay your entire assets for it — at least one million pounds. Every ten years you must pay again. But only people who can make money at that speed can keep their immortality! And then Dallas Barr, the main character, is surprised when he discovers corruption in the system! The people who are corrupting the system decide to kill him and his girlfriend, and they flee for the asteroids. Of course things turn out okay — after a lot of tedious toing and froing. And who really benefits? Since the immortals are readily identifiable, how come they haven't been torn limb for limb by the general population? The book's anchor notion — that it's okay if immortality is offered only to the wealthy, who are supposed to be 'worthy' subjects — is corrupt, so one has little sympathy for the main characters. Joe Haldeman can do much better than this.

THE SECRET ASCENSION: PHILIP K. DICK IS DEAD, ALAS
by Michael Bishop (Tor 312-93031-3; 1987; 341 pp.; US$16.95/$A22.95).

In its British edition, this book appeared under its author's preferred title, *Philip K. Dick Is Dead, Alas*. Since it is a tribute to Phil Dick, it's a pity *The Secret Ascension* is such a disappointing novel. Its premise is irresistible: that in an alternate America of the recent past, Philip K. Dick was a well-known mainstream novelist who occasionally wrote science fiction books. After he dies, he keeps making appearances in people's lives, rather like a comical Palmer Eldritch.

Bishop takes the idea for a ride, then ploughs it straight into the gutter. The book is much too long; it lacks Dick's succinctness. Its ideas unravel, and become boring. Style ain't all; you need Phil Dick's unflagging inventiveness and steely sense of structure to imitate his work. The only Phil Dick tributes that worked were Ursula Le Guin's novel *The Lathe of Heaven* — and that was because it was far more Le Guin than Dick — and Bishop's own very short story 'Leaps of Faith'.

Michael Bishop is one of my favourite writers, but he has not yet written a good novel. At novella (50–80 pages) length, where Bishop shines, *The Secret Ascension* could have been a minor classic.

THERE ARE DOORS
by Gene Wolfe (Tor 312-93099-2; 1988; 313 pp.; US$17.95/$A23.95) (Gollancz 575-04353-9; 1988; 313 pp.; £12.95/$A33).

I'll keep buying Gene Wolfe novels, but I'm darned if I'll praise them again until I see more of the talent that made *Peace* and *The Fifth Head of Cerberus* into memorable books. Since he quit his regular job, Gene Wolfe has been publishing at least one novel a year, and except for *Free Live Free* they seem churned out, half cooked. I'm sure there's a wonderful fantasy notion lying somewhere at the heart of *There Are Doors*, but I didn't find it. The main character slips backwards and forwards between worlds, the pace is frenetic, but I could never quite catch the meaning of it all. Even the ambiguous ending seems only a parody of the elaborate manoeuvres in the 'Book of the New Sun' series.

THE COMMITTED MEN
by M. John Harrison (VGSF Classics 32; 575-04220-6; 1989, original publication 1971; 223 pp.; £3.50/$A11.95).

When *The Committed Men* first appeared, the folks at *New Worlds* praised it as something like sf's gift to English literature. M. John Harrison turned out to be a good writer, but you would hardly guess it from reading this novel. Its post-holocaust landscape comes straight from Ballard or Moorcock of the late 1960s, and so does much of the style. Since then, Harrison has escaped their influence; why keep reprinting his only real mistake?

THE JEWELS OF APTOR
by Samuel R. Delany (VGSF 575-04445-4; 1989, first published 1967; 221 pp.; £2.99/$A8.99).

For years I had been told of the impact that *The Jewels of Aptor* made when it was published in 1967. When finally I read it a year ago, I found one of the most unpleasant sf books I've ever had the misfortune to finish. (I finished it only because I admirers had told me how good it was.) Rarely have I seen a book in which an author cared so little for anything he was writing about, or more for his own postulated status as a Prose Poet. There is nothing here but silly super-hero posturings, mangled sentences, and the undisguised self-importance of the writer. I'm not keen to read the rest of the novels of Samuel Delany, but I suppose one day I must.

MIRACLE VISITORS
by Ian Watson (VGSF Classics 39; 575-04645-7; 1990, first published 1978; 239 pp.; £3.50/$A11.95).

Ian Watson is the great fount of wild ideas in British sf, but since his first three novels he has lost control of his prose style. *Miracle Visitors* is full of every notion ever posited about UFOs, but they become scrambled into a melange of weird events and characters. I gave up half way through.

— Bruce Gillespie, 31 August 1990

ALAN STEWART, tall, mild-mannered and newly moustached fan about town, earns an income as a chemical engineer, but seems to spend most of his time organizing conventions, the Nova Mob, and the Melbourne Science Fiction Club; editing *Ethel the Aardvark*, Ditmar-winning fanzine of the MSFC; and contributing to ANZAPA. He is an award-winning sf poet, and his shelf holds trophies for other achievements as well. Alan also writes reviews — presented here more or less in the order I received them.

ALAN'S ALLEYWAY

by Alan Stewart

Bruce Sterling: ISLANDS IN THE NET (Ace 441-37423-9; March 1989, original publication 1988; 396 pp.; US$4.50).

Bruce Sterling's latest novel takes its title from a worldwide data and credit record net of computer-linked information. The islands, literal and figurative, lie outside the net, cut off by choice or chance.

Laura Webster's odyssey through this future of warring megacorporations makes interesting reading. Sterling's catalogue of gimmicks and jargon makes this a believable future. He uses far more detail about hardware than does William Gibson — purists claim that much of this hardware is already out of date.

In this novel, Sterling's style is similar to that of his recent novella 'The Greening of Brunei', which dealt with technological advances (mis)used for human purposes. In *Islands*, Sterling encourages the reader to identify with Laura's bewilderment and dismay at the events shown.

More accessible than *Schismatrix*, this is Sterling's most successful novel so far.

George R. R. Martin: FEVRE DREAM (VGSF 575-04492-6; 1989, original publication 1982; 350 pp.; £3.50).

The *Fevre Dream* of the book's title is a luxury Mississippi steamboat, built by Captain Abner Marsh and his new partner, the eccentric Joshua York, in 1857. During the ship's maiden voyage, Marsh becomes aware that York and other passengers are what he knows as vampires, but strange ones who drink a liquor rather than fresh blood. When some of the feral variety board the ship, the voyage becomes nightmarish.

In *Fevre Dream*, Martin is very good at suggesting the feeling of menace hanging over the ship. Martin's interpretation of the vampire legend, however, is more scientific than most. This rigorous internal consistency keeps the tale believable and enjoyable.

Marsh succeeds in establishing his major characters, Marsh and York, as individuals. However, their companions are mainly caricatures — such as the heavy-handed mate, the typical male vampire and the loyal black cook — except for Damon Julian, head vampire or 'bloodmaster'. The success of the novel is based on the vividness of Marsh and York as characters and the rich background of historical detail.

Richard Kadrey: METROPHAGE (Ace Special 441-52813-9; February 1988; 240 pp.; US$2.95).

Metrophage is set in a decrepit future Los Angeles, just a bit more down and hardwired than today's. Searching for a cure for a new plague, Jonny is caught up in a story of drug deals, alien hysteria and lost friends.

Kadrey's vision is as surrealistic as the Daliesque cover of this Ace Special edition. Imposed on the action plot are glimpses of bizarre differences between our world and that of the future.

Some of the plot developments were a bit hard for this reader to swallow, but the whole book hangs together well. With its abundance of cyberpunk archetypes, anarchic action and exciting extrapolation, *Metrophage* can be seen very much as a novel of the 1980s.

John Gribbin: FATHER TO THE MAN (Gollancz 575-04550-7; August 1989; 221 pp.; £12.95).

Father to the Man tries to tell two stories at once, and does not quite succeed. One story tells of Nobel laureate Richard Lee working in isolation with a child named Adam. The other shows a near-future breaking-down world. The latter story is told in fragmentary reports and incidents. The tale of Richard and Adam is made up of narrative and flashbacks.

Lee's involvement with human and chimpanzee genes makes it clear to the reader Adam's probable origins. Only the details need spelling out. This section reminds me of a recent BBC-TV production featuring a man–gorilla hybrid, also called Adam.

'Adam' will become, of course, the first of a 'new' race. The future society is collapsing much as in many other sf novels. *Father to the Man* is routine

sf, saved only by its interesting speculations on man–chimpanzee evolution.

John Gribbin and Marcus Chown: DOUBLE PLANET (Gollancz 575- 04357-1; 1988; 220 pp.; £10.95).

Double Planet is an entertaining near-future tale combining aspects of other recent novels. There is a voyage to a comet rather like that in Brin and Benford's *Heart of the Comet*; indeed, Brin is credited as a source for this novel. There is a well-extrapolated future background shown in snapshot scenes, like those in Gribbin's own *Father to the Man*, and a man- made diversion of a heavenly body rather like that in Roger MacBride Allen's *Farside Cannon*.

Double Planet's characters act believably within the limitations of an adventure–political yarn, based on today's hardware and information. Preaching is kept to a minimum. Recommended.

T. M. Wright: THE ISLAND (Gollancz 575-04624-4; 1989, first published 1988; 278 pp.; £3.50.)

The Island takes us to a holiday inn, a small settlement, a lake and an island in the lake in the Adirondacks, in the north-east corner of the United States. Wright tells two separate stories – that of the present, as the inn opens for the first time to cater for winter skiiers; and the past, when a family living on the island vanished as their house collapsed into the lake. The connections are the dead – frequenters of the deserted inn during the winter.

The Island did not succeed in horrifying me, or even provoking deep interest. Since I've never been in a northeastern US winter, I found it hard to identify with the threat of cold. The actual nature of the dead 'visitors', corporeal or spiritual, seemed to change with every incident. Towards the end, the tale, dissolving into brief scenes, becomes incoherent.

An overlong and inconclusive novel.

Piers Anthony: TOTAL RECALL (William Morrow 688-05209-6; September 1989; 246 pp.; $US16.95).

From a short story by Philip K. Dick ('We Can Remember It for You Wholesale') via a movie script by Ronald Shussett and Dan O'Bannon, here is Piers Anthony's novel of the film. Dick's story still provides the main idea – a man wishing to buy a fake memory of a trip to Mars discovers he has already been there – but that's about all. The throwaway alien ending of the story is expanded to give an interesting finale to the novel (and probably the film, not yet released in Australia).

Only because we know Arnold Schwarzenegger is the star of the movie can we make sense of Anthony's many references to hero Douglas Quail's muscles. The excessive killing, including that of innocent bystanders, and numerous chase sequences probably ape the screenplay, but reduce the effectiveness of the book.

Total Recall is too melodramatic. Villains and dictators are supremely evil (with inept sidekicks); the hero is exceptionally strong and agile – almost a superman. The women are beautiful. Only one sequences harks back to Dick's concern with memory and reality, but it is lost among the thriller elements of the novel. Apart from the notion of memory implantation, this could be a present-day story that included a trip to Antarctica rather than Mars.

Arthur C. Clarke and Gentry Lee: RAMA II (Gollancz; November 1989; 377 pp.; £12.95).

Rama II is set in 2200, seventy years after the craft described in *Rendezvous with Rama* left the solar system. Now a second vessel arrives from interstellar space, and a new expedition explores it.

Rama II relies very much on giving details of world history during the post-*Rama I* years. A very slow recovery from a near-disastrous recession has made the Council of Governments ultra-cautious. The new expedition's purpose is to determine whether the second craft poses a threat to Earth. Once inside the cylinder, the *Rama* specialists have their own plans.

Rama II is a solid novel, although its plot relies overmuch on deaths. It proceeds much like the government's exploration program – one plodding step after another. Small conspiracies, evident curing the voyage, mature inside *Rama*. You know there will be an expedition and they will find something – which shows how flat the novel feels.

Rama II has none of the excitement of *Rendezvous with Rama*, with its Dragonfly flight and crystal flower. Everything now seems prosaic compared with our first glimpses, fifteen years ago, of the spire-flickers of the drive or dawn arriving inside the craft.

An Afterword tells us that Clarke and Lee have just finished the second of a four-novel series! That sums up the book. *Rama II* is nothing more than a condensed minor chapter in Earth–*Rama* history.

Emma Bull: FALCON (Ace 441-22569-1; October 1989; 281 pp.; US$3.95).

Falcon, Emma Bull's second novel, is a thriller with sf trappings. The spaceships and planet-hopping make it sf, but the style and pace are those of a novel of intrigue. A young man is caught up in the machinations of the plot, which gradually reveals his mysterious past.

Interactions between characters, and even political developments, seem very much those of the late 1980s, but details of the Cheatspace piloting system and various settled worlds point to a time many centuries hence. The novel feels like a chase across cities, not planets.

Joan Slonczewski: THE WALL AROUND EDEN (William Morrow 1-55710- 030-6; September 1989; 288 pp.; US$18.95).

The Wall Around Eden begins about forty years after nuclear Armageddon on Earth, in a small North American enclave protected by a 'wall' established by aliens. The only communication is via a pylon that transmits materials, and sometimes people, mainly to Sydney, the last remaining city. Radiation still leaks through the 'wall', contaminating the food and water supply. Surrounding the village is a circle of bones of victims caught outside during the nuclear winter. The people are beginning to question their angelbec 'masters' and investigate the pylon.

Slonczewski uses many familiar sf motifs – the isolated village, reminding me of Bixby's 'It's a *Good* Life'; the enigmatic pylon transportation system that seems to enfold space; and as in Octavia Butler's 'Dawn' series, aliens trying to preserve humanity after a self-inflicted nuclear disaster.

We see the aliens through their manifestations in the village. Various explanations of them are offered to Isobel, the main character. Her experience is very limited, so much of Earth's immediate past remains unexplained. The use of Australian speech is too cliched for me (one character refers to everyone, even Isobel, as 'mate' in casual conversation). Elements of Slonczewski's Quaker philosophy echo those in *A Door Into Ocean*, her first novel.

A Wall Around Eden has intriguing aliens and a journey with a sympathetic heroine. If there are unanswered questions at the end, they add to the verisimilitude of this 'what if' post-Armageddon novel.

Piers Anthony: UNICORN POINT (Ace 441-84563-0; January 1990; 338 pp.; US$4.50).

In *Unicorn Point*, the sixth novel of his 'Apprentice Adept' series, Piers Anthony returns to the divided magic–science frames of Phaze–Proton. The battle for control nears a conclusion. Six 'Games' must be played to decide it. With a driving force, and numerous defections and double crossings, the good and bad guys act out a fast-paced tale.

In this novel, unlike the earlier *Robot Adept*, Anthony's use of different viewpoints in different chapters works. The plot moves constantly forward, avoiding the excessive repetition of the earlier book. Ideas and fun carry *Unicorn Point*, not characters. Strictly for Anthony fans.

Alan Dean Foster: CYBERWAY (Ace 441-13245-6; May 1990; 307 pp.; US$4.50).

Cyberway, Alan Dean Foster's latest novel, combines his love of alien supercomputers, seen in *The Tar-Aiym Krang*, with a realistic near-future Arizona. Vernon Moody, a detective in Florida, investigates the apparent murder of a wealthy collector. The motive seems to be destruction of a Navaho sand painting. The trail leads to a high-tech reserve in Arizona, and ultimately to another world.

Cyberway is enjoyable for its unravelling of the murder case and the mystery surrounding the sand painting. Foster shows his future society convincingly. Only Moody, with his much-described physique and back-country origins, is wearying to the reader. Much talk of the 'magic' of super-computers is Foster's way of covering up improbabilities in the plot.

Michael P. Kube-McDowell: THE QUIET POOLS (Ace 441-69911-1; May 1990; 371 pp.; $US17.95).

The Quiet Pools, Michael P. Kube-McDowell's latest novel, is set in the near future. A 10,000-berth ship is preparing to leave Earth to settle another star system. One ship has already left, and the novel deals with the people working for and against the second launch. The resistance is an organization known as 'Homeworld', whose head is 'Jeremiah'. Chapter 5 pretty much tells us 'Jeremiah''s identity, but before All Is Revealed we have to put up with several attempts to sabotage the ship and its personnel.

The argument that Earth's 'best and brightest' are being lost to outer space is countered by the argument that genetically they 'want to go'. The future technology seems little different from today's, but the future sociology includes multi-marriages and an all-female satellite settlement. Foster makes a contrast between the people of the pioneering ship and those of stagnant Earth.

The events and character interactions in this novel are just too pat.

The Quiet Pools is not as entertaining as Kube-McDowell's earlier novel *Alternities*.

Christopher Fowler: ROOFWORLD (Legend 7126-2451-1; 1988; 344 pp.; $A9.95).

In *Roofworld*, Christopher Fowler's first novel, the members of a secret society live on London rooftops, travelling via sophisticated lines and apparatus but armed with crossbows and 'penny' guns. There is vicious gang warfare as one group strives for a 'New Age' via alchemical evil, and another upholds the best traditions of Roofworld.

Roofworld's style resembles that of television's *Entertainment This Week*: short chapters and rapid changes of viewpoint offering snapshots rather than extended narrative. By the end you feel as if you've sped through, seen movement, killings and people, but never become involved.

Roofworld, despite its nice descriptions of a bleak wintery London, does not succeed in meshing the unreal alchemical with the world of mundane steel and glass.

Jack L. Chalker: THE DEMONS AT RAINBOW BRIDGE (Ace 441-69992-8; June 1990; 295 pp.; US$3.95).

In *The Demons at Rainbow Bridge*, Jack Chalker sets up a new novel series, 'The Quintara

Marathon'. Indeed, setting up and introducing characters is about all the novel does!

The Introduction tells of a Scout from The Exchange, one of three competing interstellar empires into which human-settled planets have been absorbed. The others are the Mychol, and the Mizlaplan, which has discovered 'demons' in suspended animation on a frontier planet. The three Parts describe the preliminary adventures of the three investigation teams, each seeking the new planet at 'Rainbow Bridge'. The final section tells of what they find there, gives the first reference to the Quintara, and leaves the three teams at the start of a race through an alien artefact.

This is an introduction posing as a whole novel. Wait until the entire series appears before reading this one.

Charles Sheffield: SUMMERTIDE (Gollancz 575-04761-5; July 1990; 257 pp.; £13.95).

Summertide, 'Book One of the Heritage Universe', is the latest technological puzzler from Charles Sheffield. Four thousand years in the future, human and alien societies investigate artefacts left by mysterious 'Builders' millennia before. Various experts converge on the twin planets of Opal and Quake, linked by a Builder transport device known as the Umbilical, at the time of a Grand Conjunction in the local stellar system and a consequently immense Summertide.

Sheffield describes various Builder artefacts scattered around the galaxy, but the Umbilical is the only one examined closely in the novel. Sheffield tells us something about his characters, but the reader is interested only in 'What will happen at this Summertide?'

In the end something big does happen, but it will be left to later volumes in the series to explain what it all means. *Summertide* is another 'set-up' novel, with all the necessary action and chases, but a bit of a disappointment when considered alone.

Octavia Butler: XENOGENESIS III: IMAGO (VGSF 575-04776-3; May 1990, first publication 1989; 264 pp.; £3.99.)

With *Imago*, Octavia Butler completes her 'Xenogenesis' trilogy concerning contact between human survivors of nuclear war and the spacefaring alien Oankali with this story of a critical stage in the life of Jodahs. He is a 'construct' child, with both human and Oankali parents, but he is the first to metamorphose into an ooloi, the Oankali genetic engineering/healing 'sex'. When it seems that he is out of control, his family chooses exile to protect their society.

Imago reads better than *Adulthood Rites*, the second in the trilogy, probably because much of the background has now been established. A reader new to the series would find it hard going, but it works well as a development in the series. We see the ooloi at their best, able to heal humans even of genetic disorders, and at their worst, uncontrolled and in danger of self-dissolution when unable to find mates.

In three volumes, Butler has finished her current story of contact. Will she go any further?

Terry Pratchett and Neil Gaiman: GOOD OMENS (Gollancz 575- 04800-X; 1990; 268 pp.; £12.95).

Good Omens is a lighthearted satire on today's England, as Pratchett and Gaiman describe what would happen if Armageddon, as foretold in the Book of Revelations, occurred now. Things go amiss: the M25 Motorway turns strange; the Antichrist grows up too human; the witch-finder army determines to stamp out the descendant of someone who foresaw all this and described it in 'The Nice and Accurate Prophecies of Agnus Nutter, Witch'.

Some of the touches are hilarious, such as the Four Motorcyclists of the Apocalypse. And then there are the Other Four Motorcyclists they run into. The book has lots of sniping at the authors' pet hates, such as answerphones and telephone selling services, but generally it sticks to the supernatural theme.

Setting the novel in the modern world limits the wacky freedom we have come to expect from the Pratchett of the 'Discworld' series. (The same could be said of the overmacbethed *Wyrd Sisters*.) This should please the Pratchett fans.

R. A. MacAvoy: LENS OF THE WORLD (William Morrow 688-09484-8; June 1990; 285 pp.; US$18.95).

Lens of the World, the story of the coming of age and training of a halfbreed orphan Nazhuret, is probably R. A. MacAvoy's best work to date. Set in a somewhen fantasy world, it traces Nazhuret's life from childhood at a military school to his early twenties and life as an adviser to a king.

The intensity of the novel comes not from the fierce action and bloody battles, of which there are some, but from the intricate details of Nazhuret's life. It is satisfactory as a stand-alone novel, but gains in interest when regarded as the first volume in a series. (Another first volume! Another series!) In later volumes we hope to find out more about the intrigues hinted at in Volume 1.

Keith Parkinson's cover, with its penetrating central visage and wealth of surrounding items, captures the feel of the story well. *Lens of the World* is Nazhuret's autobiography; this is his view only, and much remains to be discovered.

Recommended.

– Alan Stewart, 1989–1990

I don't know a lot about ANDY SAWYER – I hope he'll give me some biographical information for his next column. All I know is that he is a British fan, married with at least one daughter, and is connected to the British Science Fiction Association. He has supported my magazines for a long time.

SAWYER'S LOG

by Andy Sawyer

ESCAPE FROM KATHMANDU
by Kim Stanley Robinson
(Unwin 04- 440624-X; 1990; 314 pp.; £12.95)

George 'Freds' Fredericks and George Ferguson are two Americans who run into each other in Nepal, whether it be the Nepal at the end of the hippy trail, the mystic land of Shangri-La (which turns out not to be in Tibet after all), the Eden of mountaineers and rock climbers, or the real country itself. Who knows? The amalgam of the four is what makes this book worth reading.

Our daring duo's adventures start with the rescue of a yeti from a group of scientists, and continue to the discovery of the body of the climber Mallory on Mount Everest, the foiling of a plan to build a road through a remote village that is actually the original of Shangri-La, and the discovery of the literally Underground Movement that is attempting to remedy Nepal's political backwardness. (Ironically, at the time of reading there is considerable unrest in Nepal; newspaper reports remind me uncannily of scenes in the novel.)

The tone Kim Stanley Robinson adopts for his narrative is a mixture of traditional adventure mode and hilarity, partly because of his characters' consumption of large quantities of dope. Like a pair of stoned Indiana Joneses they bluster and blunder and weasel through their adventures, with Freds the crazed initiator seducing the hapless George into scaling Everest almost as an afterthought, and George the fall guy driving himself into both half-insanity and to a more serious, compassionate view of the country and its inhabitants as he tackles the almost Kafkaesque bureaucracy of Nepal. (In the last story he tumbles between farce and the Role of the Liberal Western Outsider in the same breathtakingly audacious scenes.)

To judge from the Afterword, *Escape from Kathmandu* is a homage to people and places the author himself knew in Nepal. The re-creation of the country itself is acutely and affectionately done. You could call *Escape from Kathmandu* a light satire guying the reaction of Westerners to the land of Everest, yetis and mystic monks, and you wouldn't be far wrong, but it moves along at a cracking pace and evokes images of the countryside it deals with. Freds' description of his first real sight of the massive Himalayan mountains and valleys, for instance, is riddled with cliché arising from the character himself – but it is also a *true* reaction, producing genuine awe.

There is so much incident spiced with wisecracks that the book cries out to be filmed with bankable stars. (There's a walk-on part for ex-President Jimmy Carter as himself, by the way.) It would probably make an arch and all-too- knowing film, but it's certainly the most delightfully entertaining novel by Kim Stanley Robinson that I've read.

GREAT SKY RIVER
by Gregory Benford
(VGSF 575-04303-2; 1988; 326 pp.; £3.50).

TIDES OF LIGHT
by Gregory Benford
(Gollancz 575-04066-1; 1989; 362 pp.; £13.95).

You can usually rely on sf writers, especially of the 'hard' variety, to produce absolute clunkers just when you're beginning to enjoy their books. Anyone who's got through *Great Sky River*, warming to its story of remnants of humanity scattered on a distant world near the heart of the galaxy and harried by a dominant machine civilization, will have a rude awakening at the beginning of *Tides of Light*.

After being pursued by the Mantis, with its own plans for humanity, and having been the target for cryptic messages from a god-like 'holy anointed spinning toroid of plasma and field', the family Bishop has escaped on a starship, the *Argo*. All of a sudden we're in 'Hornblower' territory as Cap'n (*sic*) Killeen agonizes over the loneliness of command and presides over the obligatory flogging of a crew member. Yes, shipmates, there are even weevils in the ships' biscuits.

Fortunately, the book gets better, especially when exploring the religious angst of the transcendent aliens the Bishop family meets. Referred to ambiguously (for the humans, with their electronically enhanced senses and chip-stored Aspects might also be so described) as Cyborgs, they are burrowing, insect-like creatures with mental and physical augmentation. They have trascended the planetary stage, and aspire to galaxy-wide consciousness. Quath, however, is still haunted by a

sense of futility underlying the universe, and it is only by contact with the despised 'Noughts', those 'dreaming, laughing vertebrates' as they are described in *Great Sky River*, that a sense of meaning can be found.

This is Grand Sf, quite definitely. In some ways, Gregroy Benford has written the most impressive sf books I've read for some time. In *Great Sky River* he hints at an epic sweep to his tale, from the enigmatic Mantis to the glimpses of deity-like evolutionaries associated with the Black Hole called the Eater. In *Tides of Light*, he shows the use of 'cosmic strings' for engineering purposes and has his hero plummet *through* a planet and survive, while behind it all are touchstone references to the philosophical humanism of Homeric and Classical Greece, or the 'chain of being' scheme so beloved of medieval theologians. Killeen's father, who may or may not be incarnate in some fashion within the Eater, is called 'Abraham'.

C. S. Forrester, an admirable writer in himself, nevertheless sits oddly among all these heavyweight influences, and in the end I'm confused. I like Benford's universe and his future history very much indeed, while the bleak romanticism of his characters' search for meaning – 'zest and verve . . . in the shadows of vastness' – seems to marry successfully the gung-ho optimism of Golden Age sf with New Wave entropy and pessimism. It's probably not so much Benford's over- reliance on narrative crutches to support inventive brilliance that I'm worried about as what this implies for sf as a whole. If its major writers are still farting around with baroquely debased dialogue and generic clichés (and *non-sf* generic clichés at that) how far can we say they live up to their potential?

Nosay noway, as one of the characters in *Great Sky River* says. Pity, because these are damn fine books and I'm looking forward to the conclusion of the epic!

THE LONG HABIT OF DYING,
by Joe Haldeman
(NEL 450-51071-8; 1989; 300 pp.; £12.95).

It's annoying to read a book that reminds you so much of others yet you can't grasp why. *The Long Habit of Dying* (*Buying Time* is the title of the American edition) is set in a future where a few super-rich people are eligible for rejuvenation. However, the treatments last only about ten years, ending in an agonizing death if not renewed. And treatment costs the patient all her or his worldly goods, with a minimum of one million pounds sterling. When rejuvenated, you must start at once to make your first million.

This is the basis of a book that is both annoying and exhilarating.

Annoying, because Haldeman appears to have confused the genders of 'incubus' and 'succubus'. Annoying, because the plot itself is trite. Who is trying to kill off the Stileman immortals and why have they framed the hero?

Exhilarating, because although there are no surprises in the plot, and the switching of viewpoints doesn't help, there are some good ideas underlying it all. In fact, the best bits are asides, such as amusing hardcore adverts for an advanced condom to protect against a variant of the AIDS virus.

The most interesting character is an AI download of a Stileman immortal who has been murdered early in the book.

Exotic drugs seem *de rigueur* nowadays, and here we have a few, notably zombi, which paralyses its victims and slows their sense of time by a factor of 600. Both main characters spend time – subjective years – under the influence of the drug, and these sections are among the best-imagined parts of the novel (just as the *post*-drugged scenes disappoint).

Haldeman seems to be moving towards the conventions of the near-sf high-tech blockbuster. Sf readers may well find *The Long Habit of Dying* an uneasy mixture of standard thriller and cyberpunk motifs. Thriller readers should find it considerably more adept than their usual fare.

ANGEL STATION,
by Walter Jon Williams
(Orbit 356-18807-8; 1990; 393 pp.; £12.95).

In this book we're on the fringes of a far-future economy in crisis, as well as the fringes of cyberpunk with the now-common varieties of drugs, body modification and street (or rather, space-station-corridor) sleaze.

After the suicide of their 'father' – whose holograms continue appearing throughout the book – Ubu and Beautiful Maria are left with mounting debts and their genetically induced ingenuity.

What in the end distinguishes *Angel Station* from most near-cyberpunk is its understated humour. We end up not with one set of losers scrabbling for a profit and dazzled by an encounter with the potential riches of an alien race, but *two*. And the other – well, I suppose I've given it away. This, I suppose, is the one about semi-legitimate but sharp merchant venturers winning over large-scale corporations, and hoorah for Popular Capitalism, but it ranks with *Hardwired* and *Voice of the Whirlwind* as a book by a writer with his finger on the pulse of the right stuff if you're looking for imaginative hardish sf.

Traditional stuff for the '90s, with humorous touches, and very good too.

CARRION COMFORT
by Dan Simmons
(Headline 7472-0237-0; 1990; 687 pp.; £14.95).

Dan Simmons won the World Fantasy Award for his first horror novel, *Song of Kali*. This (oddly, the second literary reference to a poem by Gerard Manly Hopkins I've found this week; is there a Hopkins revival on?) comes with much anticipation and more praise. It's a kind of vampire novel (although the vampires are of the 'psychic' rather than the bloodsucking sort) and a kind of sf novel (in that the 'vampirism' is a genetic mutation rather than a supernatural visitation). These 'mind vampires' can control and experience the actions of others, and

they can feed from this control to slow or delay old age. Mostly, however, they seem to use it to play games. Favourite is a kind of living chess. Some of these vampires are prominent on the world scene, and there are hints that our Great Leaders possess this power, but this is not developed. We do, however, get as an aside an explanation of Jack Ruby's killing of Lee Harvey Oswald that is as convincing as any I've heard.

Three people are set against a group of 'vampires' who for most of this century have used their powers purely for sport. They include Melanie (from whose viewpoint much of the story is told), the most developed of the villains, and Willi, an ex-Nazi. Others, more involved in world affairs, take part in a complicated struggle for domination.

Despite the interesting premise and the complex plotting, *Carrion Comfort* fails to be a *tour de force*. Halfway through the book, Simmons kills off his most interesting character, and there are confusing overlaps and flashbacks as scenes leapfrog from the point of view of the 'normals' to that of the evil Melanie. There are effective climaxes in the Philadelphia ghetto and (the big one) on an offshore island used as R&R by top politicians and ex-presidents, but this is vampirism as the banality of evil rather than the romance of it. This may be morally sound, but makes for a less compelling book than I expected.

PUZZLES OF THE BLACK WIDOWERS
by Isaac Asimov
Doubleday 385-40037-3; 1990; 253 pp.; £10.95).

If Asimov is worth reading nowadays, it's when he's *being* Isaac Asimov writing short stories, rather than when he's trying to link his novel series into one unwieldly *oeuvre*. Some people find his 'Good Doctor' persona too gushingly awful to take; this collection, be warned, does have its share of mock-conceit, but I must admit to a fondness for it in small doses, and definite admiration for the way Asimov has created a cosy little community between him and his fans by means of self-deprecating in-jokes and confessional asides.

The 'Black Widowers' stories follow the time-honoured if not downright hoary pattern of having a group of *bons vivants* dining out over a mystery, which is solved effortlessly by the waiter once all present, including the reader, have racked their brains to no avail. These tales are designed for people who agonize over crossword puzzles and whose life's ambition is to solve the murder before dear Miss Marples.

Ingenious these stories are – although it's a pity that Asimov uses essentially the same puzzle twice in a collection of a dozen stories – and they offer milder but healthier amusement than much of the author's recent sf. Fans of all things Asimovian will need no telling that the Black Widowers are based on members of Asimov's own supper club (I suspect authenticity extends to the menus, lovingly detailed), and there are the expected disparaging remarks passed about a certain so-called writer of so-called science fiction. All harmless fun, although it's interesting that the fictional Henry – the Jeevesian waiter – is by far the least interesting character.

Still, if Andy Sawyer can solve two of these puzzles *without peeking*, we must wonder how wonderful Henry's brain cells really are.

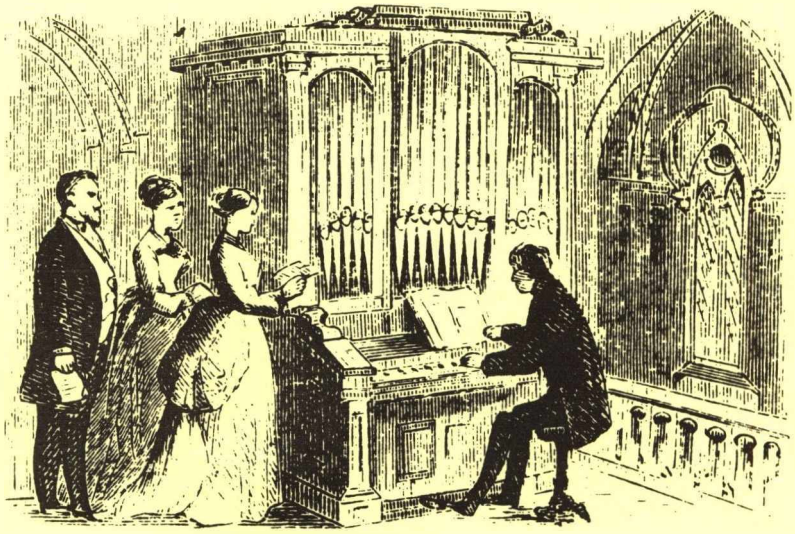
STARSCROLL
by Melanie Rawn
Pan 330-31567-6; 1990; 589 pp.; £7.99). (Also available in hardback at £13.95.)

This is one of the launch titles of Pan's 'major new hardback science fiction, fantasy and horror list', and you must wonder if it can't have done better than *this*. The sequel to *Dragon Prince*, this is centred upon the son of the couple who were apparently the main characters of the earlier fantasy, so you get the usual stuff about teenage Prince coming to terms with his Self (but nothing too angst-ridden) mixed with paranormal powers (sunlight, moonlight and starlight-weaving magic) and dragons, so you can appeal to the Anne McCaffrey market and perhaps get her to offer words of praise on the front cover. (She did.)

Such a formula can only offer particularly good writing, a new slant or interesting characters to be successful. *Starscroll* has none of the three, and Rawn's characters are so tediously hearty that I hoped for their incineration early in the book.

Are there people in the world who read nothing but this stuff, as other people confine themselves to sf, detective stories or westerns? If so, I suppose they'll read this, but what they'll get out of it beats me. If they read again the last heroic fantasy they bought, they'd save £7.99 (even more on the hardback).

– Andy Sawyer, 1990



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