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April 1992 96 pages

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TECHNICAL STUFF
This is my first *big* publication in Ventura 3.0. Thanks to Elaine Cochrane, Martin Hooper, Charles Taylor, Tony Stuart and several others who endured my endless learning process.

I MUST BE TALKING TO MY FRIENDS

Yes, there is still some Australian sf and fantasy published in Australia. No, there is still no Australian sf and fantasy industry.

The most recent commentator on Australian sf is Peter Nicholls in *Australian Science Fiction Review* 26, Summer 1991. He tackles the question of whether there is a recognizable Australian style in sf ('The stories, by and large, are *very* emotional . . .'), but pays less attention to the question of whether we might ever gain our own sf industry. On the basis of comparative population figures ('we produce about as much sf as Czechoslovakia, more than Iraq or Algeria'), he doubts it.

In saying this, Nicholls makes nothing of the fact that fifteen years ago Australia published little crime and mystery fiction except the 'Carter Brown' books. Today crime fiction is a major fiction industry here. This change began with the success of one writer, Peter Corris. Once Australian readers realized that their own crime writers could be literate, funny and entertaining, they began buying lots of others, including authors whose works do not read at all like Peter Corris's. This year, a work of crime fiction by Finola Morehead won the Victorian Premiers' Award.

It helps that many of the new Australian crime writers are academics or well known in other fields (Peter Corris as editor and historian; Jennifer Rowe as magazine editor and children's writer; Bob Brissenden as scholar; Robert Wallace as art connoisseur). Crime writing is not a hobby for them; it is a source of very useful pin money. Peter Corris is one of those few Australian writers to make an income from his craft.

What would it take for Australian sf and fantasy to become an industry? The same process that crime fiction underwent. As yet, no Australian sf writer has attained Corris-like recognition among Australian readers. As yet, academics, literary persons and general readers remain appallingly ignorant of the delights of good sf and fantasy. We still don't have an industry — but at last there are signs of a continuous underbubbling activity that might lead to an industry.

It has been a long time since an Australian periodical featuring new science fiction stories has lasted more than five issues. *Omega* did, but fiction was only a small section of that popular science magazine. Some amateur magazines, such as the Melbourne University SF Association's *Yggdrasil*, lasted years, but were seen only by readers within limited circles. *Aphelion* lasted five issues, before its publishers changed direction and became book publishers. The cover artwork for *Aphelion* was splendid, but the stories looked unreadable, because they had been set on a typewriter.

Until *Aurealis* from Victoria and *Eidolon* from Western Australia made it, no Australian sf magazine had reached six issues since *Vision of Tomorrow* more than twenty years

ago. It's a tough market; an impossible one, many would say.

Eidolon might be on sale in some book stores in Western Australia, but for the rest of us, it seems to be available only by subscription (A$20 for four issues; overseas A$40 airmail, A$30 surface mail, payable to Richard Scriven, PO Box 225, North Perth, WA 6006).

Aurealis is available both at newsstands ($6.95 per copy; or on subscription: Australia $A24; overseas A$39 airmail, A$31 surface mail; payable to Chimaera Publications, PO Box 538, Mount Waverley, Victoria 3149).

I'm pleased, even amazed, that each magazine has lasted nearly two years. To celebrate the occasion, recently I read a complete run of each magazine. The editors and publishers will have to put up with my crude comparisons.

From the beginning, *Eidolon* and *Aurealis* have taken very different approaches to cover art and interior production values.

Eidolon shows nothing on its cover but the 'eidolon' symbol. Otherwise the cover is a plain colour, which changes each issue. The magazine is perfect-bound. Inside the magazine, each page is designed, sometimes elaborately, in Palatino and Avant Garde typefaces. The effect looks handsome: having gained access to some expensive desktop-publishing equipment, these blokes know how to use it. Interior drawings are often intricate and use halftones.

Aurealis is folded and stapled. Like *Eidolon*, it has a 'digest'-sized A5 format. The cover features the title of the magazine (subtitled 'The Australian Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction'), the newsstand cover price, a list of some of the authors featured in the particular issue, and a fairly crude sf-styled cover picture, in black and a second colour, usually by Shaun Tan.

The tone of the interior design has been set by the rather basic standards of a commercial typesetter. Both headings and text are in Times. Interior illustrations are rare, and not well executed. Typesetting is close, so *Aurealis* fits in more words than *Eidolon*, and runs much more fiction per issue than its Western Australian competitor.

But how can one think of these magazines as competitors? With its plain covers, *Eidolon* could not survive on newsstands; *Aurealis*, crude in appearance, stands out on newsstands and sells well enough to stay viable.

My motive for exploring these magazines is to see whether either offers any hope of a home market for local writers. Our best writers have always published overseas, but the effect on them has been the same as on Canadian writers who have no major home market — few recognize that a particular writer is Australian, rather than American or British.

In financial terms, neither *Eidolon* nor *Aurealis* provides a 'market'. *Eidolon* admits that it can afford to pay only $10 per story, a token amount to cover the author's mailing and photocopying costs. *Aurealis* does not publish its rates, but I suspect they are not much higher.

But *Eidolon* has already begged authors to cease sending manuscripts for a few months until the editors can catch up on the backlog, and I suspect *Aurealis* is in the same position. Fiction authors throughout Australia remain hungry for publication, never (it seems) questioning the insulting rates they are paid by everybody except the ABC and a few high-circulation magazines. If there is any difference between the quality of the stories in *Eidolon* and *Aurealis*, or if either shows any sign of quality, it will have nothing to do with money.

Why then has there been, until each magazine's Issue Six, a spectacular qualitative difference between *Eidolon* and *Aurealis*?

Most issues of *Aurealis* have been a chore to read. True, I enjoyed scattered stories from such well-known writers as George Turner, Greg Egan, Sean McMullen and Rosaleen Love, and the constantly high quality of the work of Michael Pryor, *Aurealis*'s discovery. Most of the pieces, however, might just as easily have appeared in any of the amateur fiction magazines that have surfaced in Australia during the last twenty years. Amateur authors plod; they rely on adverbs and adjectives rather than nouns and verbs; they tell you much about the scenery but never quite let you see it; their characters expostulate and emote, but never come to life; their ideas are over-familiar.

'The storm followed a screaming black flight of cockatoos low over the crouching suburb,' writes Sue Isle at the beginning of story in Issue One. The story itself, 'Nightwings', had some interest, but in the end the author cannot make it into a story. She does not know how to write anything more than the flourishes of the horror story.

Who do we blame, the writers or the editors? True, the editors are committed to producing a magazine regularly. They must choose from an undeveloped writing pool, because our *best* authors and stories send their work overseas.

But this does excuse the difficulty posed by a story like 'Dawn' by Andrew McBurnie (*Aurealis* 3). It begins well: 'For the last two thousand million years, dawn had been breaking over the wind-carved landscape below.' The reader is interested immediately in the nature of the planet Dawn. Its weird geography and weather remain the focus of the story; crossing its surface proves perpetually dangerous to the main characters. Indeed, McBurnie leaves them stuck out in the middle of nowhere: 'Their downward descent halted temporarily, as the front of the two crawlers ground into a small outcrop of rubble. The crawlers rocked and trembled as the wind struck at them.' And there the crawlers and our main characters remain at the end of the story, awaiting rescue!

Surely if the editors (Dirk Strasser and Stephen Higgins) want to publish an adventure story that is effective for most of its length, they should send it back to the author with instructions to finish it. By failing to do this, they have done a disservice to the author and the reader.

During its first five issues, *Aurealis* has had its moments: deft stories by Michael Pryor, of 'Science Fiction Hall of Fame' fame, who should do his best to break into the overseas markets; Sean McMullen's 'The Dominant Style', an authoritative and engrossing tale of people living in conflicting time-environments; Rosaleen Love's ragged mood piece 'Hovering Rock', that does not quite work but provides one of the few really magic moments of my year's fiction reading.

But the fact remains that most of the stories in the first five issues *Aurealis* have been inept.

Why then has *Eidolon*, using the same national pool of authors, succeeded? Why have most of its stories been competent, even brilliant, while *Aurealis*'s have not?

Eidolon publishes a lower percentage of fiction than *Aurealis*. Its editors have not bent to the same pressure to fill pages. Instead, they have published reviews and criti-

cism that have been readable and occasionally brilliant. The *Aurealis* people, probably correctly, see that the Australian general sf reader is not much interested in reviews and criticism.

I *guess* that the *Eidolon* editors have been more willing to commission stories than have Strasser and Higgins. This takes a bit of gall, if you offer only $10 a story. Everything else about *Eidolon* shows evidence of gall (spiced with occasional traces of egomania). At any rate, *Eidolon* has consistently published most of the authors usually considered Australia's best: Philippa Maddern, Greg Egan, Terry Dowling, Rosaleen Love, Leanne Frahm, and Sean McMullen.

And if these authors have merely submitted stories rejected by overseas publishers, there is no evidence of slackness in the stories themselves. All of Greg Egan's stories show his dry, obsessive malevolence mixed with original ideas; 'The Extra' (Issue Two) is one of the best stories I read during 1991. Rosaleen Love's 'Turtle Soup' (Issue Three) seems better every time I think about it; as a correspondent wrote in Issue Five, it is a genuinely frightening story. And the last paragraph on Page 68 of Issue Three is the best piece of prose I read in 1991.

If the editors of *Eidolon* want to pat themselves on the back (in lieu of financial reward), they can add to their list of Big Names the names of some fine new writers. Geoffrey Maloney (three very good stories so far) is their New Author Most Likely to Succeed. Co-editor Jeremy G. Byrne should write more stories after the success of his amusing, dextrous 'Tizzy's Tail' (Issue Two).

Apart from patriotic breast-beating, why pay attention to either magazine? Glittering achievements hardly bring glittering prizes. The editors cannot give up their day jobs. Their authors will still need to sell overseas in order to establish careers.

Much of the answer lies in *Aurealis* No. 6, December 1991. After reading the fifth issue of *Aurealis*, I was on the point of giving up on it. Apart from Robert Paes' ghastly cover, I liked most things in the new issue.

Sean Williams' 'Light Bodies Falling' features an idea that goes back to James Tiptree Jr, if not much earlier. A person is pursued through time. He and his pursuer arrive at a particular point in our space and time. The story-teller tries to puzzle out the situation while the story unfolds around him. There are some memorable images in this story, including the last.

David Tansey's stories for earlier issues of *Aurealis* have been generally unreadable, but 'La Luna' is a cleverly told adventure story about a man pursued over the surface of the Moon. Adventure-story writing is as difficult as any other form of fiction, and few Australian writers achieved this level of competence.

James Milton's 'Where the Cold Wind Blows' seems a conventional horror story, but it has that extra touch of tactile experience that makes it more interesting than most I've read.

Simon Brown has contributed stories to both *Aurealis* and *Eidolon*, but none of his earlier work has the strength shown in 'All the Fires of Lebanon'. Brown mixes a gritty story of Western hostages held in the middle of the Lebanese war zone with a supernatural story that works. The combination of elements gives an impact to the story that could not be found in a mere journalistic report of Lebanese events.

And *Aurealis* 6 features Michael Pryor's 'Long Live the King', the most original Australian story since Lucy Sussex's delicious 'God and Her Black Sense of Humour'. Rick E. King is an Elvis Presley Impersonator, Second Class. The galaxy is filled with Elvis Presley Impersonators, and Impersonators of every other type. Rick lands on the wrong planet: New Vegas. It is controlled by Frank Sinatra Impersonators. Rick is in trouble. The story is ludicrous farce, but it works well.

Why mention the contents of one particular issue of one of these magazines?

Because the sixth issue of its competitor is fairly nondescript, showing that not even the *Eidolon* crew can work wonders all the time.

Because all the *Aurealis* writers are suddenly writing much better than they have before. Even if *Aurealis* fails eventually, it will have served its Higher Purpose: to act as a kind of writers' workshop for its stable of writers. The sf magazines in any country serve this purpose, without realizing it. Those people who have attended short-term, high-intensity writers' workshops will know how the stimulating experience fails to prepare the writer for the hard slog of life-long writing. Magazines like *Aurealis* and *Eidolon*, appearing dependably, can work in a way that is impossible for the original fiction anthologies — they publish writers regularly until they improve. This has happened during the last two years. May *Aurealis*, *Eidolon* and any future competitors be able to keep publishing.

For most of the last twenty years, the wildly fluctuating strength of Australian sf publishing has been in books, not magazines. *Aphelion* failed, but its publishers did not sneak off into the night (as we at Norstrilia Press have done), but began Aphelion Books. I admit that I have not yet had time to review two of their most recent publications, *Rynosseros* and *Wormwood*, by Terry Dowling. Any volunteers? I reviewed George Turner's *A Pursuit of Miracles* in *SFC* 69/70. I'm looking forward to Aphelion's first original fiction anthology, but I hear that its publication has been delayed. Two new Aphelion books were launched at Swancon 16, the Western Australian convention held on Australia Day 1992.

In this issue, my contributors and I review *From Sea to Shining Star*, the A. Bertram Chandler collection published by new small publisher Dreamstone. I've only just read *Glass Reptile Breakout*, Van Ikin's collection of Australian sf, some new and some reprint. Lucy Sussex tells me that a new collection of Australian feminist sf and fantasy has been published, but I haven't seen it in any bookshop.

Most Australian sf and fantasy is still published overseas, still poorly distributed in Australia. This issue I review Andrew Whitmore's neglected fantasy novel *The Fortress of Eternity* and George Turner's *Brain Child*, highly praised overseas but neglected here. A new Rosaleen Love collection is expected soon from Britain's Women's Press. Wynne Whiteford and Keith Taylor are still appearing regularly. And Greg Egan has signed a contract with Legend in Britain to produce both novels and books of short stories.

And that is the state of Australian sf and fantasy writing — thin on the ground, but vigorous and occasionally very enjoyable. There is still no Australian sf industry, but maybe *Eidolon* and *Aurealis* can be catalysts for its creation.

— Bruce Gillespie, 6 January 1992

PINLIGHTERS

URSULA LE GUIN
PO Box 10541, Portland, Oregon 97210, USA

I would assume that a reviewer named Steele who lets his reviews be called 'Steele Column' is a fairly fervent masculinist; and that being so, his review of my 'fervently feminist' *Dancing at the Edge of the World* is generous, and I appreciate its generosity, though I'd like to correct some errors in it.

My non-fiction hasn't been, as he says, hard to track down — *The Language of the Night* has been in print since 1979, and Women's Press put out a British, revised edition in 1989.

I was not defending Margaret Drabble personally so much as all women writers who write from their experience as mothers against the fate of 'being disappeared' by the critics and professors.

And I really did not recommend the use of my pen-name to persons with mild inner-ear disturbances.

Finally, in his review of my *Buffalo Gals*, Mr Steele describes the title story as that of 'a child lost after a plane crash finding refuge in a shape-changing animal community'. It is, of course, his privilege as reader to point out that in fact the animals don't change shape; only perception alters. Myra sees Coyote as a coyote *and* as a woman; Coyote sees Myra as a child *and* as a lost pup; Owl sees her as a child *and* an owlet, etc. The 'community' is not one of magicians, werewolves, or something like that; it is the community of living creatures. It makes some difference. The only 'shape-changer' tale in the collection is 'The Wife's Story'.

It is a great pleasure to get *SF Commentary* and feel in touch again for a moment with my friends in Australia.

(14 January 1991)

We hope that you will be able to return to Australian sometime, Ursula. Meanwhile, greetings from us.

WALT WILLIS
32 Warren Road, Donaghadee, Northern Ireland BT21 0PD

Thank you for *SF Commentary* 69/70. I passed it on to James White, so that he could enjoy Elaine Cochrane's perceptive review of his book *Futures Past*. He commented:

> In the old days I remember *ASFR* doing very good and constructive reviews of *The Watch Below* and *All Judgment Fled*, and this was a nice one of *Futures Past*. The theme of that collection was supposed to be outdated sf futures, which the reviewer suspected, I think, and I offered to write an intro explaining this, but the publisher didn't want to know about it.

I suppose the most spectacular example of an outdated future must have been Theodore Sturgeon's Biddiver, which postulated that the effect of the radiation in space would be to turn the first astronaut into a hairless, blue-skinned monster. It must have come as some relief to all concerned when the actual result looked no worse than a US senator.

Reading the rest of *SFC* I felt a familiar sense of awed admiration. I have this vision of a limitless field of corn, such as you see in the American midwest, through which move fleets of state-of-the-art combine harvesters. Chomp . . . chomp . . . chomp they go, leaving behind neatly packaged bales of reviews. It is reassuring to know that someone is looking after all this stuff. I am only too well aware that exposure to even the blurb of another trilogy would send me into a coma from which I would awake to find myself reading the Law Reports in *The Times*.

However, now and then I come across an evocative reference to the sort of sf I enjoy — for example, by Colin Steele to Arthur Clarke's 'Rescue Party'. This was for many years my favourite sf short story, and it is dispiriting to be reminded that it was Arthur Clarke's first. My other two favourites were Blish's 'Surface Tension' and Asimov's 'Nightfall'. It is interesting to me to note that none of those three appear to fall within what Colin Steele regards as the 'best traditions of science fiction, that is, to extrapolate from today to provide a realistic vision of, and for, tomorrow'. I have tried to read the cyberpunk trilogy Colin commends and was left with the feeling that extrapolation of that kind is the poor man's imagination. This modern 'Back to Gernsback' movement represents the ideal sf author as a sort of Bart Simpson, an underachiever and proud of it.

It may be that most of *SFC* is of only academic interest to me, but what's wrong with academic interest? And every now and then you do come out with something I find of intense personal interest. This time it is your piece about the mention of you and your reviews in a book by Brian Aldiss, because something like that happened to me too. For about fifteen years from the mid sixties, when after fifty years of tranquillity in Northern Ireland the current travails began, I devoted all my energy to my job as a civil servant and lost touch completely with fandom. One day in the late seventies I was walking along a corridor of the Treasury Building in Whitehall with my boss, on the way to an important meeting, when he said, a propos of nothing, 'By the way, Walter. Are you Ghod? With an "h"?' It turned out he had come across a book in the local public library by Brian Aldiss, in which Brian mentioned attending a science fiction convention at which I was so described, the result of an old joke. The shock of this unexpected confrontation with a past life, and the effort of trying to explain it, turned my thoughts to fandom again and when shortly afterwards I retired from work . . . well, here I am. And here you are too, also partly as a result of a shaft

of illumination from the Aldiss lamp. Altogether now, THANK YOU BRIAN!

(19 March 1991)

BRIAN ALDISS
Woodlands, Foxcombe Road, Boars Hill, Oxford OX1 5DL, England

Thanks for your warm reception of *Bury My Heart at W. H. Smith's*. I don't think you need reproach yourself too much, though of course I recognize self-reproach as a long-continuing feature of the Gillespie character. It was mine too, haunting me like an old importuning beggar for many a year, until I shucked it off — as I've shucked off many another attribute I could no longer live with. My theory is — and I'm about to expound an elaborate version of it to a group of Oxford psychiatrists — that the psyche renews itself every seven years, much as the physical anatomy does. We are not the continuity commonly supposed. This is in part recognized, as for instance in the way we clearly see childhood, teenage, and old age as separate components of a life. I can look back and see where here — and here — I underwent a definite psychic or spiritual change.

In *Bury My Heart*, only shortage of space and time precluded my mentioning *Metaphysical Review* and a thousand other things; judgement was hardly involved. I dragged my heels over the book, and finally had to foreclose swiftly. I didn't write about my trip to Australia in 1978 for the same reason. I enjoyed that trip greatly.

An autobiography? I could never write it; it would be too incredibly sad. Why should I burden others — my family for instance, in which I set such happy store — with the misery I underwent for countless years? Life's a triumph of hope and biological happiness over adversity, from which most people suffer in their most vulnerable years. We're so courageous in our sorrows, so outrageous in our pleasures.

(28 August 1990)

Many years ago, Brian, you said in a reference I can no longer find (and therefore must paraphrase) that incidents from one's life are much too valuable to be wasted in autobiography. It sounds as if you are sticking to your guns. Many well-known writers of your own nation and generation have recently produced autobiographies: do they ignore the pain, exorcise it by examining it for the first time, or simply write a special brand of fiction?

The Hutchinson regular edition of *Bury My Heart at W. H. Smith's* was not distributed in Australia, and there's been no sign of a paperback yet. I still don't know whether any of the editions acquired an index.

GERALD MURNANE
2 Falcon Street, Macleod, Victoria 3085

Thanks very much for recommending *Daddy We Hardly Knew You*. As I expected, Germaine Greer herself annoyed me. I skipped a number of pages of her writing about herself and her prejudices. But the story of her father kept me interested, and the last few chapters gripped me.

I know I'm reading an outstanding book when I stay awake all the way home in the train so that I can go on reading *and* when I take the book out of my bag as soon as I've arrived home so that I can go on reading further. I finished the story of the Tasmanians sitting at the kitchen bench without having unpacked my bag or opened my mail or read the paper.

I learned something from those last, fascinating pages about the Tasmanians — something of use to fiction writers. Several nineteenth-century writers — Conrad, Gissing, and George Eliot, at least — spoke of fiction as the art of the *indirect*. Fiction, according to those worthies, was the art of suggesting, of revealing gradually; of setting down the character's words and deeds but leaving his motives to be guessed at. While I read the last pages of Greer, I was more concerned about the persons named in the text than I'm concerned about the characters in most of the fiction that I look into nowadays. This has nothing to do with the Tasmanians' having lived on this planet at one time whereas the characters of fiction have not done so. It has to do with the narrative; Germaine Greer was able to write only the outlines of the lives of the suffering Tasmanians. This one gave birth to a child; this one sent a note to the public service body overseeing foster children — a note begging for removal from a foster parent . . . and while I read these few details, I, *the reader*, had to write the novel in my mind. I had to see for myself the green farms of Tasmania, the cottages in the back streets of Launceston, the Western Tiers in the distance. I had to imagine what this or that character was thinking or feeling.

(15 December 1989)

What impressed me most about *Daddy We Hardly Met You* is the sense of the author's falling through one rickety floor of perception after another; believing that one set of assumptions is the truth, only to find that these assumptions are false, and so are the next set of assumptions. It is this sense of free fall into the unknown that I like most in fiction, which probably explains why overall Philip K. Dick is still my favourite writer.

MALCOLM EDWARDS
Grafton Books, 77–85 Fulham Palace Road, Hammersmith, London W6 8JB, England

I was very interested in your article on Philip Dick's non-sf novels. As you'll know, I was responsible for publishing four of them at Gollancz: *Mary and the Giant*, *The Broken Bubble*, *In Milton Lumky Territory* and *Humpty Dumpty in Oakland*. And, of course, I am now at Grafton which has — or shortly will have — all seven of those which have appeared in print in its Paladin imprint (*The Broken Bubble* comes out in August 1991, completing the set). I've also looked at — but declined — *Voices from the Street* and the other earlier novel (which you omit from your list) *Gather Yourselves Together*. *Voices*, alas, has a substantial chunk missing quite early on — twenty or thirty pages — which means, I think, that it will only ever see small-press publication. *Gather* dates from about 1951 and simply isn't much good.

I think your point that Dick's sf is better than his non-sf because in it he is writing about things which, to him, were more real, is a key insight: one of those paradoxes that unlocks the puzzle. Yet I did enjoy the four non-sf titles Gollancz published, and *Confessions of a Crap Artist*. (I disliked *The Man Whose Teeth Were All Exactly Alike* and for some reason can't get through *Puttering About in a Small Land*.) I think that, curiously, being published in the 1980s they are more interesting than they would have been in the fifties and early sixties when they were written.

You can see the problem those editors experienced who liked Dick's non-sf writing, encouraged him to a degree that must have made ultimate rejection almost unbearable, but did, in the end, turn the books down. The writing is fluent and engaging; the characters seem to me effortlessly lifelike; there's compassion and humour. But the situations tend to fold up on him: he seems, in general, utterly flummoxed by the notion of organizing these people into a *plot*. The novels tend to blur into one in my memory, but I think it's in *Humpty Dumpty* where the viewpoint character deals with the crisis scene of the novel by locking himself in the bathroom and refusing to come out. Well, I can identify with that, but as a narrative strategy it leaves something to be desired! Also, the settings are far removed, I think, from what one might expect to encounter in novels: they are very definitely *away* from where the political or social action of the time is.

But, as you say, you can now get from these novels a set of social and historical details which is certainly not part of *my* image of America. These small-town suburbs, on the cusp of changing from independent communities and being absorbed into the urban landscape. These small-time businessmen, struggling not to be wiped out by larger and more efficiently marketed companies. It's fascinating stuff, now; but the response *then* would generally have been: so what?

That said, I do think it is a great pity that *Mary and the Giant* couldn't find a publisher in the early fifties, as it seems to me that its treatment of interracial themes (and frankness about sex) *would* have stood out then. One can imagine it having been enormously controversial, perhaps even influential.

But, at the end of the day, what we got out of all this was the sf novels. It's a pity that the price of that was Dick's *angst*, though at least one can see that *he* could see the rewards begin to stack up in later years. For myself, what I regret more is his apparent abandonment of the sf novels he *wanted* to write after *Martian Time-Slip*, when that book had difficulty finding a publisher.

(7 March 1991)

I could dispute points forever, but that hardly alters the fact that we agree on most important aspects of the Dick non-sf novels. Thanks to you and Mark Zeising and the other publishers who resurrected them, Malcolm.

I should point out that since he wrote the above letter Malcolm Edwards has become head of fiction publishing for HarperCollins.

ROB GERRAND
863 Hampton Street, Brighton, Victoria 3186

I realize that you wrote 'The Non-SF Novels of Philip Dick' before reading Gregg Rickman's biography (I have read Volume I), but it is still fascinating. I haven't read the Sutin biography, and I assume it doesn't touch on some of the appalling circumstances that befell Dick as a child that help to explain — or rather, assist us in understanding — many of Dick's difficulties.

I agree with much of the broad thrust of what you write, and disagree with some of the detail.

To me the 'mainstream' novels are as good as the best science fiction, and much better than those you term 'potboilers'. I don't believe you can accurately describe any of Dick's novels as potboilers. Alternatively, if potboiler is defined as a work written to make money, and if writing was his main source of income, I suppose you could define most of his novels as potboilers. Which is ridiculous.

A brief aside: Like you, I dislike the term 'mainstream'. What a ghetto indicator it is. One of the minor irritants of Rickman's book is that each Dick non-sf novel, on being discussed, is prefaced by the word 'mainstream'. The science fiction novels are not usually prefaced by 'science fiction'.

What I find particularly illuminating in reading Dick's novels is how they have strengthened my reading of his science fiction.

For example, speaking of his novels you state, 'All the action springs from the personalities of the characters, not from exterior menacing forces', and imply that, with exceptions, most of Dick's sf lacks 'interesting characters'.

Yet I have always been amazed at how much virtually all of Dick's works are bound up in how characters relate and react to what is happening about them — the exceptions, such as a few early gimmick short stories like 'The Short Happy Life of the Brown Oxford', are rare.

The fight between partners is a running thread through the sf novels; most of the short stories gain their force not from the 'sf idea' but from the main characters' reaction to it.

Why then, if I believe that Dick's non-sf novels are as good as or better than his science fiction, were they not published earlier?

I think you put your finger on it in ascribing the novels' strength when you state, of *The Man Whose Teeth Were All Exactly Alike*, that 'the battle between two families . . . seemed too painful to read'. It was the pain, the bleakness and the honesty of Dick's vision that made US book editors of the 1950s and 1960s unwilling to publish them.

Yet I have difficulty reconciling this comment, with which I agree, with your statement a paragraph earlier that 'Dick could not allow himself to write [the truth] in the non-sf novels. In the end, they failed to sell because in them Dick was constantly pulling back from what he really wanted to say'.

In writing the novels, Dick was attempting to portray the America he knew, as a twentieth-century Balzac might. I don't believe that, in the end, Dick felt he was being untrue to himself in taking the 'ordinary world' as a given.

For example, *Mary and the Giant*, as well as 'being about' the things you mention, also deals with such matters as sexual molestation. Dick's depiction of the narrowmindedness of the small-town mentality, in the wider context of his understanding of America, is acute.

One of the reasons the books are being printed now is that they provide an extraordinary picture of the amoralism and dishonesty of Californian culture, and the drama of the books derives from the attempts of the characters to be moral in that vacuum. One thing I suspect readers today would say, when reading one of the novels is: that's really how it was! (even if you were never there).

I have just finished rereading *Confessions of a Crap Artist* (a book you don't discuss). Since I read it over a decade ago I had forgotten how powerful the book is, and what a horrifying depiction of disintegrating relationships the book presents.

What a picture of Dick and his past and future wives. On Page 3 of your essay you state, 'But when Dick's second marriage, to Kleo, broke up in 1958, he found himself living with Anne, a lady with expensive tastes.' That sentence may be true according to the Sutin biography, but *Confessions* gives the real story: Anne decided that Dick's marriage to Kleo should end and that Dick should marry her.

It's interesting that Dick can be seen as two characters in the book, possibly three: Nathan, the young

student and husband-to-be; Jack Isidore, the 'crap artist'; and Charlie Hume, the husband and angry suicide.

It's as if Dick painted himself as the before and after husband in Nathan and Charlie, and himself the writer as Jack.

Paul Williams, in the introduction to the 1978 Entwhistle edition, says of *Confessions of a Crap Artist*:

> It is a *tour de force*, one of the most extraordinary novels I've ever read. There are, I believe, two essential reasons why it has taken Philip K. Dick sixteen years to get this novel published. The first reason is the intensity of the picture the author paints. This is the sort of book that makes editors shiver with (perhaps unconscious) revulsion, and leaves them grasping at any sort of excuse ('I don't like shifting viewpoint') to reject it and get it out of their minds. The people are too real.

Take this scene from the book. Nathan is being driven by Fay Hume, whose husband Charlie has suffered a heart attack and is in hospital:

> 'Listen,' she said after a while. 'Are you going to go running home to your wife and tell her about me propositioning you?'
>
> He said, 'Are you propositioning me?'
>
> 'No,' she said. 'Of course not. You propositioned me. Don't you remember?' She said it with absolute conviction. 'Isn't that why you came over? Good god, I wouldn't dare let you in the house. That's why I'm driving you back.' They had almost gotten to his house, now, and he realised abruptly that she really intended to drop him off. 'I'm not letting you into my place,' she told him. 'Not without your wife. If you want to come over you bring her along.'
>
> With anger he said loudly, 'You're a nut. A real nut.'
>
> 'What?' she said, faltering.
>
> 'Don't you pay any attention to anything I say?'
>
> That seemed to crush her. 'Don't pick on me,' she said. 'Don't you get picky. Why do you pick on me?' Her tone reminded him of the younger child's tone, the whining, self pitying tone. Perhaps she was calculatedly imitating her child's tone; he had an intuition to that effect. It was both a satire and a theft. She used it and satirised it simultaneously, waiting to see how he reacted.

Contrast this passage with the following scene from early in *Clans of the Alphane Moon* (page 19 of the 1964 Ace edition). Chuck Rittersdorf is married to a Fay Hume type — called Mary — a representative of the educated, sophisticated middle class that Dick was apparently never comfortable with. Chuck and Mary's marriage is nearing its end:

> To Mary the issue had been clear: here was a job possibility; it had to be poked thoroughly into. Fled would pay well and the job would carry enormous prestige; each week, at the end of the Bunny Hentman show, Chuck's name, as one of the script writers, would appear for all the nonCom world to see. Mary would — and here was the key phrase — take *pride* in his work; it was conspicuously creative. And to Mary creativity was the open sesame to life; working for the CIA, programming propaganda simulacra who gabbled a message for uneducated Africans and Latin Americans and Asians, was not creative; the messages tended always to be the same and anyhow the CIA was in bad repute in the liberal, monied, sophisticated circles which Mary inhabited.
>
> 'You're like a — leaf-raker in a satellite park,' Mary had said, infuriated, 'on some kind of civil service deal. It's easy security; it's the way out of having to struggle. Here you are thirty-three years old and already you've given up trying. Given up wanting to make something of yourself.'
>
> 'Listen,' he said futilely. 'Are you my mother or just my wife?'

The relationship of Nathan and Fay has run its course; Dick is describing the end of his own marriage to Anne.

The passage also provides an insight into Dick's self image as a science fiction writer, with Mary's putdown of him as working for the CIA an obvious parallel for sf writing, including Mary's view of sf fans ('in bad repute in . . . liberal, monied, sophisticated circles').

(10–21 January 1991)

We don't seem to disagree on anything important, except this slippery term 'reality'. Phil Dick himself used it in different ways. As Malcolm Edwards points out, Dick was always on the track of 'reality', but in the non-sf novels he mistakenly found it in the physical shapes of ordinary things and people. Obsessed, he portrayed this reality with absolute clarity. Later he discovered 'reality' to be a kind of world-shape hidden behind ordinary things, a reality that had little to do with his wives, friends or enemies, or the places he inhabited. He tracked down that new reality, and nabbed it in books like *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch* and *Ubik*. In the 1970s he believed he was about to discover 'ultimate reality' (*VALIS*). Into this pit I (so far) cannot follow him, although Sutin provides some guideposts to the path Dick was on when he died.

KIM STANLEY ROBINSON
2414 Elendil Lane
Davis, California 95616, USA

Naturally I was fascinated by 'The Non-Science Fiction Novels of Philip K. Dick'. It was great fun to read and I enjoyed having my book on Dick referred to, and indeed used as a kind of organizing start-up point. Despite your talk's nature as a rebuttal to my assertions, I have no trouble at all agreeing with a lot of what you say about his mainstream books; and I must say that you had it pegged when you talked about my response to them perhaps being influenced by the conditions under which I read them. It was over the Christmas holidays of 1976, and I had very little time, and unfortunately I gave my best reading to the first one, a tome called *Voices from the Street*, which has not been published yet, and for good reason — interesting as it is for PKD reasons, it's still quite bad in most respects. And after that 700-page monster, I had to hurry with increasing speed through the rest of them; did not in fact read some of the best ones (as I understand it; though I own them all, I still haven't gotten around to reading some of them, I am ashamed to say). So, that is not how novels are meant to be read, and I did not do them justice in my reading, or in my book.

Anyway, I am willing to grant everything that you say about his mainstream books, except perhaps the notion that they are funny; I've never seen that, even re-reading them in a better state. Except for *Confessions*; and then I shouldn't speak about the

ones I haven't read (*Puttering About*, *Broken Bubble*), so maybe they are funny. But humour is so personal, and black humour more personal yet; and it may just be that he doesn't strike my funny bone.

But I think we basically share a view that it's the sf of PKD that is his greatest work, and very great work indeed, and the none of the mainstream books come close to equally them. Your last paragraph I completely agree with. And the thing is, there are people in our community who would indeed maintain that his mainstream novels are his real masterpieces; I guess David Hartwell, who was instrumental in publishing them, thinks he will eventually be known most for these. But I can't see that.

I should add that I think *The Transmigration of Timothy Archer* is one of his finest books, and a model of what he wanted the earlier novels to be, but didn't have the skill to pull off: funny, wise, perfectly paced, lancing right through everyday life to the critical philosophical issues underlying it, and also incorporating the Strange in a brilliant way. Altogether a great achievement.

And I will flog myself to read those others of the 1950s books that I haven't, just so that I really know the stuff I'm supposed to know.

I found the material in *SF Commentary* and *The Metaphysical Review* amazingly wide-ranging and erudite and entertaining; the only thing I've seen to compare to them was in fact the *Australian Science Fiction Review* of recent years, I guess now deceased; I was sent copies of that for a few issues, but never replied, which was bad of me, as I read and enjoyed them all (please convey that to the relevant people with my apologies for not writing, if you see them). I like in your publications the level of sophistication combined with straight talk — the absence of the various litcrit jargons that fill the supposedly serious critical sf journals in America. The pretentiousness of things like *The New York Review of SF* is so awful that it is pleasure indeed to see proof that serious thought need not be that way. There is a bad idea here in the more literary part of the sf community, stemming from the inferiority complex that haunts it in a way I think the Anglo sf community is freer from, which says that serious thought can only be expressed in academic jargon, to show it is serious; but the vocabularies of the new lit crits, quite powerful when used by people who know what they mean and are using them to actually say things, are in the hands of the pretentious merely a smokescreen for bullshit. So there is a simple transitive equation going on here, which has serious thought equalling bullshit; and damned if we don't see a fair bit of that.

I was really extraordinarily pleased by Andy Sawyer's review of *Escape from Kathmandu* in *SFC* 69/70; not just that it was good, but the way in which he liked it, or what in it that he liked. I haven't had any better response to that one.

PS: Yes, I'm in a neighbourhood where all the street names are out of Tolkien: Bombadil, Rivendell, Oakenshield, Westernesse, etc. Unbelievable.

(12 November 1991)

It took me several years to track down Kim Stanley Robinson (known as Stan, he tells me). He was in Switzerland, then somewhere on the east coast of USA, then known to have travelled west. Thanks to Doug Fratz for the information I needed.

Needless to say, all the above comments were gratifying. It was Harry Warner Jr who said many years ago that *SF Commentary* should be best known for its 'straight talk about science fiction'. I don't like jargon; if people talk about books, they should say what they mean as clearly as they can. For this reason, I want nothing to do with the current academic approach to litcrit. Fortunately one can still read, however occasionally, interesting commentators about literature: in America, John Updike and Gore Vidal as the successors to Edmund Wilson, who himself embodied all the virtues of the great readable critic; Humphrey McQueen, Stephen Knight and Imre Saluszinsky in Australia; and I-know-not-who in Britain these days. The best sf critics tend to be fiction writers themselves: Brian Aldiss, Christopher Priest, Ursula Le Guin, George Turner, Joanna Russ, Dave Langford and Michael Bishop come to mind immediately. But then there are fine critics like John Foyster, Peter Nicholls and John Clute who don't often write fiction.

ROBERT JAMES MAPSON
PO Box 7087
Cloisters Square,
Western Australia 6000

In general I agree with your remarks and the conclusion of 'The Non-SF Novels of Philip K. Dick', but I would have given *Humpty Dumpty in Oakland* a higher rating. Only a personal thing, you realize, but this is one of my favourite of Philip Dick's non-sf work, a novel in which I feel he deals most closely with the themes that preoccupied him so much: death and meaning, reality and purpose. For example, the following passages, chosen quite a random while flicking through the novel:

> Once again he was beneath a car, down in the cold darkness, among the indistinct shapes.
>
> He stayed at the bar far into the late evening, drinking by himself, thinking it all over, admitting to himself again and again — it always seemed to be there — that he absolutely lacked the ability to see how things really stood. It seemed to be a major defect in him.
>
> 'But you have instincts,' she said. She was moving out of the little house, shutting the door after her. 'Good instincts which will save you, if they have not already. You must depend on them, and also, my good young friend, on letting someone else show you how to get about in this cruel old world of ours which, alas, you understand so little. So dreadfully very little.'

Why didn't you include *The Cosmic Puppets* in the list of sf novels related to the non-novels?

Because it's one of a small number of very early Phil Dick novels I've never read.

On the strength of your and Michael Tolley's reviews of the (not really) complete reissue of the works of Cordwainer Smith, I decided I had unjustly neglected his works and decided to seek him out. Supernova Books (the specialty store in Perth) had nary a trace of his works, and I ended up hunting further and further afield. Thank heaven for little bookshops that no one ever visits. Eventually I (after getting sick of staring at E. E. 'Doc' Smith spines) located copies of *Norstrilia* and *The Instrumentality of Mankind* at remaindered prices, and *The Rediscovery of Man* from another source. Three down, one to go!

Cordwainer Smith strikes me as a marvellously funny, very serious, extremely intelligent, eminently

easy-to-read and captivating author. Calling the alien Schmeckst (the German familiar form of the verb 'to taste') in 'On Gustible's Planet' is an example of the little things he does when crafting his work.

So far I think I have enjoyed 'The Game of Cat and Dragon' most. As Garrison Keillor says, 'Cats don't crowd you. A cat is there when you need it, but it's not all over you. Next time, have a cat. You'll be glad you did.'

I hope Michael Tolley recognizes that Artyr Rambo ('Drunkboat') is a transliteration of Arthur Rimbaud, who once said that his time spent in London was 'a period of drunkenness', and who spent the last part of his life exploring unknown parts of the world.

(28 March 1991)

SYD BOUNDS
27 Borough Road
Kingston on Thames,
Surrey KT2 6BD, England

I'm glad to see you letting your hair down with a comic strip. I liked the cover, too, and suggest you press-gang Ian Gunn as your regular illustrator.

A great idea, but lots of other fanzine editors in Australia have had the same idea. Last I heard, Ian was not available to be press-ganged.

Dave Langford is the greatest. More of his reviews will be welcome; unfortunately, his approach makes the other reviews seem dull. Doubly unfortunate that most of this issue is taken up by reviews. To me *SFC* means 'I Must Be Talking to My Friends' and the letters, both cut off in their prime this issue. Who reads reviews?

We can't all be Langford-type geniuses. Probably no reader consumes all the reviews, but chooses a few that work consistently. For instance, I find that although Colin Steele writes very short reviews, I can usually tell from his remarks whether or not I will like any particular book.

I can only print the best of the letters I receive. Science fiction and fantasy don't create the same interest as the subjects discussed in *The Metaphysical Review*. Also, I now include my personal/fannish/lifestyle comments in *TMR*, not here.

The one redeeming feature about your reviews is that you pay some attention to short stories, and I hope you will continue in this. I've never understood why a story padded out to commercial book length and called a novel should get automatic reviews.

Nice to see Cordwainer Smith getting some attention, but it could have been emphasized that most of his work appeared first in the magazines, mainly *Galaxy*.

I've just written 15,000 words of extra material for a course in Crime Writing. Collins has reprinted five of my children's stories in its *Bumper Book of Ghost Stories*. I shall be a guest at the first Vintage pulp and paperback book fair in September in London. It seems you just have to outlive the others to get famous! I'm still coping at 70, but twinges of old age are setting in.

(13 January and 27 August 1991)

RICHARD BRANDT
4740 N. Mesa, Apt. 111
El Paso, Texas 79912, USA

Re. *SFC* 69/70: the first thing to snare my eyes was Ian Gunn's back cover — a brilliant conceit, playing on the total artifice of motion pictures, where even the smallest mundane detail has been placed there by conscious design; after reading these captions, one can hardly watch a film again with any semblance of willing suspension of disbelief.

The review of *The Jewels of Aptor* is especially heartening after Doug Barbour's rhapsodic review of *Stars in My Pocket Like Grains of Sand*; perhaps you should give the later Delany another go, however, I was asked to lecture a friend's high school 'Academic Decathlon' students on the subject of Science Fiction (What It's All About, etc.), and the first question asked at the end of my talk was: 'Whatever possessed the designers of the course to list this book as required reading?' The book was *Nova*, and the question a good one, since the book was out of print when the course was created. My best answer was that those of an academic persuasion view Delany as an exemplar of the Literary sf writer, and that Delany himself is fully conscious of this.

The occasional typographical error mars this production, although none (save the all-but-inevitable 'Robert Block') is too crucial except for the omission of publishing data on Howard Waldrop's *Strange Things in Close-Up*. Also you misremembered the award won by Pat Murphy's *The Falling Woman*, which was the Nebula, not the Hugo (for which it failed even to be nominated).

Finally, I am delighted by Andy Sawyer's notion that those who save eight pounds by not reading the paperback of *Starscroll* and re-reading some other fantasy novel instead can save even more by not reading the hard cover.

(1 February 1991)

DAVID RUSSELL
196 Russell Street
Dennington, Victoria
3280

Robert Day makes a mistake in *SFC* 69/70. He writes that Douglas Adams's *Dirk Gently's Holistic Detective Agency* was based on the *Doctor Who* script 'City of Fear'. There was no program of that name.

There was an episode called 'City of Death', but that plot does not match the *Dirk Gently* book as closely as that of another *Doctor Who* story — 'Shada' written by Douglas Adams. This features a retired Time Lord living as a don in Cambridge. *Dirk Gently's Holistic Detective Agency* features a similar character: Professor Urban Chronotis, the Regis Professor of Chronology. Of course he's not a Timelord; the BBC would have complained about copyright. He's merely the owner of a time-travel machine. 'Shada' was not broadcast, because filming was interrupted by a strike at the BBC.

Do read your review copies of the 'Dirk Gently' books. The first one is a delight to read — not as jumpy as the 'Hitchhiker's Guide' books, although *The Long Dark Teatime of the Soul* does not hang together as well as the first.

(31 January 1991)

BRIAN EARL BROWN
11675 Beaconsfield
Detroit, Michigan 48224,
USA

I assumed that Douglas Adams's first 'Dirk Gently' novel was a rewrite of an unproduced *Doctor Who* script 'Shada', but then I've not read more than the first chapter of the book and a summary of the screenplay (from the *Dr Who Programme Guide*). I couldn't get into the book because the opening

is too frenetic — lots of unrelated persons and incidents — which is irritating in a novel but typical of a *Doctor Who* episode.

What I like about Langford's columns is that he's writing to entertain and thus can use satire and irony to better effect than if he were writing straight reviews. Often the worst aspects of a book are the parts that are hardest to explain in a review when one is trying to be clinically honest. A little sarcasm can go a long way.

Odd to think that *all* of Cordwainer Smith's stories (but two) can be collected into just four books. One tends to think 'surely he wrote more'. Perhaps that is why Smith has been given such short shrift in various sf encyclopedias and guidebooks: too few stories that are too individual in nature to generate obvious heirs to his style. But Smith is certainly among the major sf writers, the ones who've actually done something with the form.

Your comments about Gene Wolfe's *There Are Doors* makes me feel less guilty about having trouble starting his *'Pandora' by Holly H. Hollander*. Even if it is written as if by a not-very-smart sixteen-year-old girl it should not come across as by a sixteen-year-old with a clumsy writing style.

(11 April 1991)

RALPH ASHBROOK
303 Tregaron Road, Bala Cynwyd, Pennsylvania 19904, USA

Surprise. *The Naked Lunch* is the Philip K. Dick movie we've been waiting for. As interesting as *Blade Runner* and *Total Recall* are, they have a futuristic, science-fictiony feel to them. We are visiting these strange worlds. We are only watching. Dick's books sneak into your brain beside your mind. At the same time they make you confident that you've been here all along and they make you doubt everything. It is this paradox that gives art eternal life. As in Picasso's *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*, the shock is not just the frightening masks that are the women's heads, but the familiarity of those masks. We have known them for thousands of years somehow.

The point at which *The Naked Lunch* moves into Philip Dick territory is at a party William Lee (Burroughs) is attending. His host confuses Lee by referring to something they are unaware of. Lee says: 'How can we be unaware of it? We're talking about it.' The host answers, 'No. I am talking to you telepathically. If you look carefully at my lips, you will see that the words I am saying are different from the words you are hearing.' This moment is similar to reaching for a bathroom light cord that has always been a switch or finding on the beach a paper with 'kiosk' written on it instead of the kiosk.

The other Dickian passage in *The Naked Lunch* occurs when Lee's two friends visit him in Interzone, which appears to be a place but is a state of mind. They startle him with the news that not only has he written a book but that it is being published. All Lee was aware of was endless battles with a series of hostile typewriters. When the friends go, we are relieved to be back in our other reality, and take comfort from the fact that our success and survival are independent of our experience. This sounds like something Phil Dick told us, but we were too lost in reality to hear.

The Naked Lunch is also surprising because it is about writing without being stupid. Writing is so crucial to Lee's life that his struggle plays like a detective quest or a love story. His fights with his and his friends' writing instruments are a wonderful allegory of the creative struggle. It has never occurred to me that P. K. Dick's work is about writing. My assumption, most notably from reading *Now Wait for Last Year*, is that it is about surviving and understanding. I will go back and check.

(January 1992)

WE ALSO HEARD FROM . . .

PATRICK McGUIRE, who took too seriously an offhand remark of mine, and begins 'You complain that you cannot make money by writing lit crit for overseas magazines because you do not have an advanced degree, and the academics took over the industry in the seventies.' He then explains how one might make money writing lit crit for a variety of sources. I *know* this, Patrick. By spending every waking hour practising the art of lit crit and by submitting to a wide variety of source, I might make a few thousand dollars a year by the year 2000. But at the same time I can earn what I call a living by editing boring but worthy secondary textbooks, and retain some free time to publish *SFC* and *TMR*. By the same argument, few people in Australia can afford the thousands of hours it takes to become a fiction writer, although the current recession will probably give plenty of people the compulsory free time they need.

I hadn't heard from **LEE HARDING** for years. He sent some personal news at the beginning of 1991, and since then I've seen Irene, Madeleine and him at least twice. One of these days I'll get down your way.

GREG EGAN sent a cheery note as his fortunes improved during 1991 — lots of stories sold, both overseas and in the new Australian magazines. 'Yes, I do remember that you always advised me to sell individual stories rather than trying to flog collections . . . in fact, I'll happily concede that all the advice you've ever given me has been invaluable. (I know, I know, this doesn't compete with a thank-you note from Brian Aldiss, but it's the best I can offer).' Recent news is that Greg has signed a contract to produce two novels and a book of short stories for Legend Books.

As usual, **GABRIEL McCANN** corresponded about the Philip K. Dick Society. As usual, I haven't received a thing since I resubscribed. This is the fault of Californian organizer Paul Williams, I presume. Gabriel writes: 'After *Blade Runner* I was a bit disappointed with *Total Recall*. It began with Dick's premise, but then just settled down to a series of long, seemingly endless chases with Arnie being shot at or blowing other people away. The special effects were pretty good, but I was expecting something more.'

FRANZ ROTTENSTEINER sent a newsy letter in January. I haven't heard from him since how well George Turner's *The Sea and Summer* did in Germany. Although he promises nothing (and one hears that the recession has hit Germany as well as Australia) Franz is interested in looking at submissions of quality Australian novels and short stories for translation and German publication: the address is Marchettigasse 9/17, A-1060 Wien, Austria.

Two correspondents inscribed the dreaded 'Do Not Quote' across the tops of their letters. These letters were juicy mini-masterpieces that I'm aching to quote; they came from **DAMIEN BRODERICK** and **SCOTT CAMPBELL**.

A really nice letter on pink paper came from **KAREN PENDERGUNN**: 'I can't imagine doing any-

thing for twenty-two years, let alone a magazine. . . . I have seen your house. It's a fan's dream: walls covered floor to ceiling in books, records and CDs. Heaven! A place that you would never leave if you didn't have to. Bah to real life; it keeps intruding.' I'm glad somebody else sees things my way, Karen.

Karen also writes: 'I don't think I have ever seen a copy of *Australian Science Fiction Review*. Did I miss a great deal over all those years?' Yes. 'I wonder if the New Wave of Australian fandom can produce as much that lasts and is remembered. *Ethel the Aardvark* has been published regularly for awhile now. Does it take the place of *ASFR*?' No, but like *ASFR* it shows the value of having a fannish team to help produce a magazine. You must visit some time, Karen, to handle the sacred relics: my copies of *Australian Science Fiction Review*, both first and second series.

And as we happened to be talking about the Great Phenomenon of Australian Publishing:

LETTERS TO A CURRENTLY DEFUNCT FANZINE

A slight problem here. Although *ASFR* published my address in one of its very last issues, I received only one letter of comment:

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

Re. *ASFR* 25: I was suitably convulsed by Dave Langford's book article, even though I gave up reading Donaldson after the place early in his first book where his hero chances upon a woman after he's been translated to this new world, and promptly rapes her. I actually read all the other books he's commenting on.

I do think Langford reached too far in his quibble about the situation in Moreta being different from the ballad about it. Surely he doesn't think all those Olde Englishe Ballades are *factual*? Or for that matter, take the immortal line from a more recent ballad about the *Titanic*, written shortly after the disaster: 'The captain tried to wire, but his lines they were on fire'. Rhymes and scans very nicely; has very little to do with the actual event. I have no difficulty at all in believing that a ballad-writer would put in lines about black dust and freezing air, if he or she thought it made the story more dramatic. (Correction: I didn't read *Habitation One*, either. Just as well.) One good thing about *Battlefield Earth*; after I reviewed it, I didn't get copies of the dekology.

I have been told by a reputable source that Stirling wrote *Marching Through Georgiia* as a dystopia, and has been a bit confused by its reception — especially by the favourable reception of the Draka in some quarters. Of course, this could be an after-the-fact justification, but then it might be strict fact. I haven't read the book myself, though one of these days I intend to.

(3 April 1991)

Meanwhile, one of the editors received comments from various correspondents during the year:

YVONNE ROUSSEAU
PO Box 3086 Grenfell Street, Adelaide, South Australia 5000

Though there are no Formal Responses apart from Buck Coulson's to the final *ASFR*s, **Dave Langford** has written:

> many, many thanks for rushing me the Final Egoboo of *ASFR* the last (and penultimate). Actually, you weren't all that far off my suggested style of indexing. After wallowing for some time in the glory of numerous Langford entries, I half expected to come across something like 'Statten, Vargo, *The Micro-Men*, pointedly and significantly not mentioned by Langford, Dave. . . ' No, it's a wonderful index, but I feel quite guilty at having provoked so many entries by rambling all over the place in 'Dragonhiker'.

And (earlier: on 6 August) **Franz Rottensteiner** wrote us a letter ending with best wishes to us and 'whoever you may see' — which I believe means people like you and Roger and Bangers rather than (sob) the ones we really are able to see. He said:

> I am sorry about the demise of *Australian Science Fiction Review*, but wonder whether I shouldn't drop *Quarber Merkur* too, for there are really more pleasant things than pounding a typewriter or cranking a museum piece of a Gestetner machine (yes, they still exist), quite aside from the fact that one doesn't get younger either.
>
> What else? For the first time, thirteen Lem books may be readily accessible in Australia in paperback (from Mandarin) plus *Solaris* (from Faber) and *Fiasco* (Futura) too. The BBC now has a 55-minute portrait of Stanislaw Lem which is said to be excellent. It hasn't been actually screened yet because Graham

> Greene died just on the day before it was supposed to be shown, and they had a film on Greene instead on *Bookmark*. I expect that it will also be sold to Australia and shown there.
>
> I am still in publishing and read lots of books for various publishers, all kinds, and thankfully almost no fantasy or science fiction. Sometimes there are even books among them that I might want to read privately. It keeps you busy.

And the Adelaide University Library (the Barr Smith) revels in being (I think) unique among Australian university libraries:

> This is to thank you for your Gift to the Barr Smith Library of a complete set of: *Australian Science Fiction Review: Second Series* (which has now ceased publication). We are most pleased with this acquisition, for as you are aware we do in fact hold the first series in the Library, and will now add this edition to the collection, thus giving us complete holdings of this publication.

Most recently, **Ursula Le Guin** has written me a letter which includes the injunction: '— best to all my old friends, please —': this means you! Part of this letter tells:

> As you see I too have entered the computer age, sort of. That is, my husband & I have a nice macintosh and we Time Share on it (sort of) and I have advanced as far as learning how to instruct it to make the first page of the manuscript different from all the other pages (it took five computer experts to find out). I think I may rest on that laurel. I use it mostly as a sort of flexible typewriter & am subject to deep sleep attacks when people talk about windows and e-mail and things. As a subject of conversation it is very nearly as boring as baseball. I find myself a little leery of the 'absorptive' quality of the computer — like tv, the little screen sucks you in and narrows your world to it and holds you (falsely) disembodied. [. . . .] But I can *use* that queer concentrative force without letting it use me — I have been experimenting with writing poetry on the mac, and it is very interesting, the fluidity, like handling soft clay, changing it with your fingers, playing with it. It allows a different kind of play. That's good. But when you come right down to it I don't give a hang what I write on, so long as I can write. If it had to be a piece of stone & a chisel I would be hard at it, chip, whack, shit, chip.

Lucy suggested that Ursula might like to read *Handfasted* — and this proves to be true:

> I have (and enjoyed) a Catherine Helen Spence novel, can't think of the name & am too lazy to run downstairs & check, and have read your review of *Handfasted*, and thought, Oh, I'd like to see that! So: Yes!! Please!!! But will you tell me what I can send you, that's hard to get there?

So I've sent *Handfasted* and asked for *That Lass o' Lowrie's* by Frances Hodgson Burnett (which was published in a US paperback a few years ago, but which in Adelaide I could only read in a Special Room in the Adelaide University Library).

Ursula also mentioned the bake sales that Karen Joy Fowler and Pat Murphy dreamed up to raise money for the James Tiptree award:

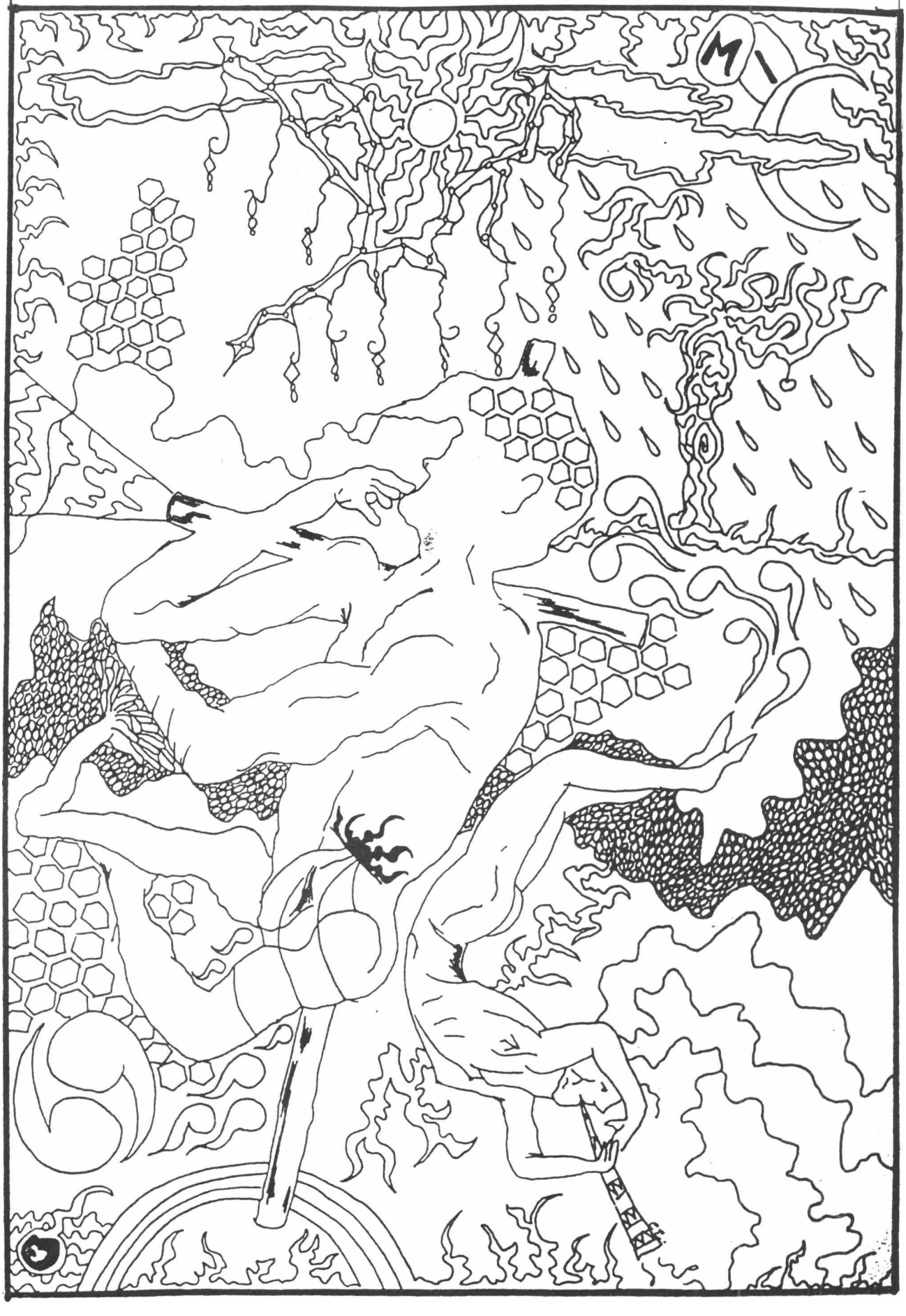
> It is totally the nice little woman in a frilly apron thing. Pat & Karen & all the young women involved find it extremely funny (as well as moderately profitable) and so do I, but when I found that my dear Virginia Kidd was outraged, I couldn't explain it to her. she didn't see the satirical slant, and kept saying 'But Tiptree would have *hated* it!' and I kept saying 'I think it would have tickled her. . . . Who knows? I suggested that the prize be edible — a giant fortune cookie with a hundred-dollar bill inside — but I think they are going for a chocolate statuette.

In addition, she reports that she's doing the Norton Anthology of (North American Modern) Science Fiction (stuff written since 1960) — with Brian Attebery for the academic bits, and Karen Joy Fowler as consultant:

> (I haven't been keeping up with the current stuff & need a guide into cyberpunk etc.) I stopped buying much in the late 70s (when I started catching up with what women were & had been writing) and have read very little in the eighties, as so much of it seemed rather repetitive.

Confictionary was enjoyable — it was good to see George Turner again, and (with such a small convention) it was even fun being fan guest of honour; moreover, it's the first time I've been in a hotel where a fire alarm went off, much less where the hotel had caught fire. There were a few toddlers amongst us, and (at about noon on Sunday) I found myself walking carefully just behind one down two flights of stairs and through a couple of corridors, out into the open air — all of us moving heel to toe in complete silence, apart from the eerily slow-motion shuffling of feet. Once outside, we were among excitable kitchen staff (one of whom was explaining to the others how efficiently she'd called the fire brigade), while hotel-high flames were roaring away in a pergola attached to the hotel wall, creating astonishing quantities of bounding black cloud. Two fire engines rolled up to put the fire out; and out convention went on after lunch, with Karen Ogden ('Chair Thingy') at one point explaining impressively to a smoker that the fire had been caused by a cigarette butt dropped out of the window. (Not by any of us, however: perhaps by someone at the 'Men Against Violence' convention on the floor below us?)

(21 September 1991)



DAMIEN BRODERICK surely needs no introduction. At least that's what I thought, until I read in *Eidolon* that Peter Macnamara, of Aphelion Books, had met him only once. Does Damien attend even fewer sf conventions than I do? I suppose that's true. I met Damien first in 1968. Damien remains saturnine, amusing, argumentative and depressingly well-read. He is good company on those rare occasions when either of us feels like company. He is one of Australia's best, and best-known sf writers. Heinemann Australia recently reprinted much of his work in paperback.

CHEAP EATS OR GOOD FOOD GUIDE?

by Damien Broderick

Discussed:

THE ULTIMATE GUIDE TO SCIENCE FICTION
by David Pringle
(Grafton; A$35)

The world's a supermarket, shelves crammed with trash and treasure. How do you tell one from the other? Increasingly, by going straight to the shelf crammed with guide books. *Cheap Eats, How's Your Drink, Good Reading Guide*. . . . One of my most frequently consulted books is Steven H. Scheuer's annual *Movies on TV*, which lists and evaluates the zillion films and videos swarming out of the box.

Fans tend to be omnivorous, but people who gulp down everything in sight, Good and Bad alike, all too easily end up Ugly. And there's a lot of real trash out there at the moment. It seems a smart time for Dr David Pringle to bring out his *Ultimate Guide*, a zero-to-four-star rating and synopsis of some 3000 sf novels and short story collections available in US or British editions (so much for the rest of us).

Pringle knows his stuff. A former editor of the stylish academic journal *Foundation*, he's author of *Imaginary People: A Who's Who of Modern Fictional Characters*, *Science Fiction: the 100 Best Novels*, and *Modern Fantasy: the 100 Best Novels*. The emphasis, as always, is on the world's English-speaking metropolitan centres, so that in *SF: the Best 100*, only one was from a non-British, non-US writer (he noted with a modest cough). The range is extended in this new volume, both in time and space, but, as with the 'M. H. Zool' Bloomsbury *Good Reading Guide*, books published only in Australia (for example) get excluded.

Many of the four-star books are well-known classics: Wells's *The Time Machine*, *The War of the Worlds*, Verne's *20,000 Leagues under the Sea*, Huxley's *Brave New World*, even Wyndham's *The Day of the Triffids*. Many more are already granted modern classic status: J. G. Ballard's *The Drowned World* and *The Crystal World*, surreal metaphors of psychic disintegration in an increasingly lost civilization (ours); Thomas Disch's re-run of the Faust legend, *Camp Concentration*; Walter Miller's post-holocaust

A Canticle for Leibowitz; Ursula Le Guin's ideologically correct fable of androgyny, *The Left Hand of Darkness*.

Others again are recent triumphs of imagination wedded to textual brilliance: Gene Wolfe's tetralogy 'The Book of the New Sun', in which the apprentice torturer Severian grows up on a dying Earth to attain ambiguous mastery of its endlessly complex world, and at last to redeem it; Brian Aldiss's 'Helliconia' sequence, an enormous feat of world creation that follows two entwined alien cultures, and our own, through thousands of years of drastic evolution; Ian Watson's spectacular debut novel *The Embedding*, a politically committed novel that tries to show the extent to which language controls and constructs reality (and almost succeeds in its ambitious attempt).

Other novels again will be unfamiliar to many readers, even fans: John Sladek's funny, rather moving *Roderick* and its sequel *Roderick at Random* (a sardonic wink to lovers of Smollett, the eighteenth-century novelist), about 'a learning machine, a wide-eyed little robot who wanders like Candide through a crazy near-future America'; M. J. Engh's *Arslan*, 'the ruthless young leader from Turkestan' who 'seizes power from the bureaucrats from the Soviet Union' and 'sets out to free the Earth from the pressures of human civilization'; Disch's *On Wings of Song*, a richly lyrical satire that somehow turns New Age claptrap about out-of-body experience into an immensely moving tragic love story, with jokes.

No Australian book earns four stars, though several get three: one of these is George Turner's *The Sea and Summer*, winner of the 1988 Arthur Clarke Award, 'an admirably sombre and well-realized vision of life in the 21st century after almost everything has gone wrong'. My own *The Dreaming Dragons* is said to be 'a lively story, explosive with ideas'. This welcome opinion seems not to be shared, by the way, by the various British houses that have declined to pounce on recent opportunities to publish it in the UK (hint, hint). A third is David Lake's *The Man Who Loved Morlocks*, which 'comments wittily on Wellsian perceptions and preconceptions' in *The Time Machine*.

Since to my knowledge this last appeared only in the local Hyland House edition, perhaps I'm wrong about the non-UK-US exclusion principle. But I feel a bit depressed that significant Oz anthologies are absent — Van Ikin's *Portable Australian Science Fiction*, my own *Strange Attractors* and *Matilda at the Speed of Light*; similarly, Rory Barnes and my *Valencies* (UQP, 1983) missed out, as did, say, Nancy Corbett's *Heartland* (Black Swan, 1989). I trust Terry Dowling's *Rynosseros* (Aphelion, 1990) will make it into a future edition, along with George Turner's collection *A Pursuit of Miracles* (ditto) and my own *The Dark Between the Stars* (Mandarin, 1991).

A number of our best-known immigrant writers are listed, sensibly enough, by place of origin as well as residence (or current citizenship). After all, nobody considers Arthur Clarke Sri Lanka's most famous sf son. So A. Bertram Chandler and David Lake, with seventeen books between them in the index, are shown as UK/Australian. Chandler's most highly regarded novel, the rather dull *Kelly Country*, gets only a single star, and the terse remark: 'A curiosity which should be of interest to Antipodeans.'

Pringle declares his intention to include 'all the masterpieces — and quite a few of the stinkers'. He does not pull his punches with books he hates (that anyone with any sense must hate, in fact, though the bloody things often outsell the good stuff). John Norman's odious 'Gor' books 'have degenerated into obsessive sado-masochistic pornography of an offensively sexist kind. They have been popular, alas.' In Asimov's regrettable *Robots and Empire* 'the robots Daneel and Giskard go on for ever — as does this 500-page novel, which is all talk, talk, talk'.

Happily, Pringle includes sharp comments from other British reviewers when they are especially apt. Of L. Ron Hubbard's *Battlefield Earth*, which became a bestseller by dint of pious mass purchases from Scientologists, he states simply, 'It has no virtues', and Roz Kaveney adds: 'There is a degree of badness that is not even funny . . . unremittingly dreadful.' Sadly, I suspect that many people with an untested aversion to sf imagine it is all like Hubbard's illiterate rubbish. Pringle's favourites would soon put them straight.

— Damien Broderick, March 1991

COLIN STEELE is Librarian at the Australian National University Library , and a regular reviewer for the *Canberra Times* (see later in this issue for the evidence). As convener of the ANU/*Canberra Times* Literary Lunches, he believes that authors are just as interesting in the flesh as in print. He still hopes to entice Ursula Le Guin back to Australia for the 1993 Australian National Word Festival.

Anthem and cadence of the young

by Colin Steele

THE DARK BETWEEN THE STARS
by Damien Broderick
(Mandarin 1 86330 083 X; 252 pp.; A$12.95)

(Reprinted from *Australian Book Review*, No. 130, May 1991.)

Damien Broderick said in a 1982 interview with Russell Blackford that 'I've always been an ironist, a sly jester, a remote punster'. Mix these attributes with a very Catholic upbringing and the influences on the ten short stories and novellas collected in *The Dark Between the Stars* become very clear. Broderick prefaces each of the pieces, only marginally altered from their first publication between 1964 and 1988, with autobiographical musings that are both illuminating and incestuous.

They're incestuous because references are made to writers and personalities in the science fiction genre that might not be immediately recognizable and understandable to the general reader. Australian crime writing has come out of the closet, but science fiction will remain hidden away unless it breaks out of its occasionally ghettoized circles. Mandarin's recent reprinting of Broderick's novels and short stories, however, is to be much welcomed as part of the process of lifting the visibility of Australian sf. Broderick is not, however, sf's Peter Corris. His stories are probably too elliptical, quirky and intellectually buoyant to attract a popular audience.

To Broderick, in that same interview, sf is 'sport, game-playing, ingenuity, cross-referential wit, adventure spiced with a blend of that comfortable awe which old-time religion ritualised quit nicely'. Old-time religion certainly had its influence on the young Broderick. Science fiction, 'the anthem and cadence of the young', as Broderick indicates in his Introduction, allowed Broderick's mental escape from the Christian Brothers in Melbourne and the Seminary of the Blessed Sacrament Fathers at Bowral.

The first story in the collection, 'All My Yesterdays', written in the early 1960s, mixes immortality, religion and psychiatry as Lazarus endlessly seeks the solution to his eternal wanderings. Broderick wrote in Van Ikin's *Science Fiction* magazine in 1986 that he felt his early work 'stinks' and that he had 'sold to a brainless market which taught no virtue . . . which rewarded only crappy tricks'. Broderick is too severe here, but 'All My Yesterdays' does rely overmuch for its impact on the last-sentence revelation — a standard device in the 1950s.

Broderick puts his Catholic background to much better effect in 'The Magi', the best and most powerful story in the collection. A Jesuit priest's belief is challenged on a distant planet but an alien reaffirmation of personal salvation occurs. 'The Magi' is probably the most traditional of the stories in the collection. Elsewhere the idiosyncratic challenging voice of the narrator often overlays the basic characterization.

Broderick takes the reader on a stimulating journey of discovery encompassing time travel, reincarnation and machine intelligence. In 'A Tooth for Every Child', set in a not-too-distant Melbourne, Broderick challenges any complacency we may have on medical advances as male pregnancy implants and reincarnation through deformed babies are chillingly linked.

Personal continuity of a variant kind is found in 'Coming Back', as a university experiment involves a bitter-sweet reversal of time for the leading researcher.

'Resurrection' takes cloning to a distant future where a revived computer scientist finds the nature of reality difficult to discern. Broderick ponders here whether the future cure is preferable to the disease of free will.

An equally far future in 'The Ballad of Bowsprit's Bear's Stead' sees a time traveller return to observe the possible fall of an Empire to the barbarians at the gate. The influence of Friedrich Durrenmatt's Romulus the Great is evident here as another Emperor 'clown' reaffirmed human dignity in the face of adversity.

Broderick wanders through the intellectual storehouse of the twentieth century to tease, cajole and entertain the reader. Broderick can be both exasperating and illuminating in the profusion of ideas and comments he embodies in his narratives — but dull he never is. He may be Australian sf's Court Jester to George Turner's Elder Statesman and Lucy Sussex's Lady in Waiting. The Australian sf throne is currently empty. On the evidence of *The Dark Between the Stars*, Broderick has the credentials and ability to ascend those fictional steps, particularly if he can harness his perennial inventiveness to the rigour and strictures exemplified in 'The Magi'.

Now here's another introduction to **DAMIEN BRODERICK:** He was the sf reviewer for Melbourne's *Age* newspaper for some years. The following column reprints the best of Damien's reviews for the 1990–91 'Summer Tempo' supplement of *The Age*. Hence the references to the Gulf War. Since he wrote these reviews, Damien has handed the job of *Age* sf reviewer to Peter Nicholls, and has become the science-book reviewer for *The Australian*.

COSMOS AND DAMIEN:
Sf reviews
by Damien Broderick

THE CHILD GARDEN
by Geoff Ryman
Unwin Hyman; A$34.95)

Book-reviewing combines a mess of functions: poison-taster (saving readers from the real rubbish), connoisseur (guiding you to the 'best'), exegete (explaining what the book means), critic (placing it in historical or theoretical context), spruiker, entertainer. Increasingly, these divergent demands lead either to genre surveys — thus confining thrillers, children's books, science fiction into convenient ghetto columns — or to general-interest confections of bright, brisk bites. Only highly topical or 'serious' books gain the dignity, and unprejudiced readership, of an extended notice.

By those usual criteria, Geoff Ryman's marvellous novel would be secured firmly within the corral labelled 'science fiction'. It's set in the future, most of its characters are educated/indoctrinated by designer viruses, and get their sustenance straight from sunlight, through their rich purple skin. What's more, nearly everyone dies by the age of thirty-five, a side effect of the contagious cure for cancer. Is this nonsense the sort of thing grown-ups want to invest valuable leisure-time reading?

Beats me. I guess it depends whether you insist that fiction has no other permissible charter than the explicit evocation of the commonplace.

Put so bluntly, this narrow opinion would be hotly repudiated by most readers not brain-dead. Literature is about *imagination*, after all. But surely we must draw the line somewhere. Purple people? In the *future*?

Ryman, a Canadian living in Britain, won awards for his 1986 novella 'The Unconquered Country', an unbearably poignant parable about Cambodia's rape. *The Child Garden* extends his range considerably, positing a world governed by the worst excesses of reductive science and idealist ideology. Like most fashionable postmodern novels it is a text about the creative process of reading. Its brilliantly sustained inventions are often metaphors drawn from current high literary theory, as Umberto Eco's are, and like Eco's steeped in traditional learning and story-telling.

For *The Child Garden* is above all a stunning reconstruction of Dante Alighieri's journey, 700 years ago, from the Inferno through Purgatory to a transcendent and beatific vision. Quite literally, it proposes (and embodies) *The Divine Comedy* as a twenty-first century Wagner might conceive it in a Bayreuth as large and inescapable as the polluted sky.

Milena, amnesiac refugee to British purgatory from Czechoslovakian hell, halfway through her short life, is a prim, sour Tenniel Alice who commits Dante's own sin — she forgets her Beatrice, a wild woman composer named Rolfa, Genetically Engineered for life in the Antarctic. By the standards of the ruling Party, her sin and crime is to love Rolfa in the first place. 'This was a semiological product of late period capitalism. Milena suffered, apparently, from Bad Grammar.' Her story is a *Bildungsroman*, taking Milena from cramped repression to insight, redemption, indeed sainthood. it is funny, genuinely moving, teemingly fecund, baroque while remaining cleanly and beautifully written.

The Child Garden is subtitled 'A Low Comedy', and it is that. Ideas tumble about the page like performing animals, like humans infected by diseases of information. If Rolfa is Milena's Beatrice, the viruses (especially a virus that encodes the persona of dead Heather, who reads all Marx's works to the child and cannot be shut off) are her Virgil. To convey something of its flavour I shall quote from the closing passage, because in a sense there is no surprise ending in a text drawn so faithfully (and paradoxically) from the first two books of the *Commedia*:

> Milena died.
>
> She settled into the silence and was divided. All her separate selves were freed: the infant and the child, the orphan in the Child Garden, the actress and the director, the wife and the People's Artist, Milena the Angel, Milena the oncogene, Milena who carried the Mind of Heather, and the Milena who remembered Rolfa.
>
> They rose up like the white pages of a written speech thrown to the winds. The pages blew like leaves, were scattered to their individual and eternal Nows. The Nows were no longer linked by time or by a self. They went beyond time, to where the whole truth can be told. It takes forever to tell the truth, and it is bound into one volume by love. This is the third book, beyond words or low imagining.

If *The Child Garden* is perhaps not yet that long-awaited work that successfully bonds the force and aspirations of both literature and sf, it comes close. But refresh your acquaintance with Dante first. And enjoy.

QUEEN OF ANGELS
by Greg Bear
(Gollancz; A$29.95)

The future will be *different*: surely this is sf's primary postulate.

Will it be better, or worse? Wrong question. In fifty or sixty years' time, today's children will be the elderly, and their standards won't be the same as ours — *whatever* happens.

One of sf's best-liked newcomers is Greg Bear, whose *Blood Music* (1985) introduced nanotechnology, machines built on a molecular scale. For his blockbuster epics *Eon* and *Eternity*, Bear devised one of sf's classic big toys, a discontinuity stretching from this world into infinite space and time. Spielberg might yet make them into the ultimate road movies.

In *Queen of Angels*, Bear attempts to portray an American world of 2047 — a world real in every fibre of the text, as utterly different from our own time as ours is from the Elizabethan.

The rich live in combs, vast hi-tech termitaries. Between these arcologies, in the Shade, dwell the untherapied. Society is rich; nano machines can literally build gourmet food from garbage, construct full-scale robot devices (arbiters), even transform human bodies. An artificially intelligent probe investigates the planets of Alpha Centauri B, beaming back data and opinions for dispersion through LitBid interactive media programs designed to give Phillip Adams and Robyn Williams wet dreams. Crimes are solved with ease by highbrow pds — public defenders. And the mind/brain itself is giving up its secrets.

In this endlessly inventive utopia Emanuel Goldsmith, the world's most famous black poet, runs amok, murders eight of his friends, vanishes. Transformed pd Mary Choy must track her suspect, but more importantly she needs to understand his crime. The immensely wealthy parent of one of the victims, capturing Goldsmith, seeks to use prohibited psychological techniques that permit an observer to enter another human's Country of Mind — the substrate of mental agents, talents, sub-personalities that comprise each self. In an eerie parallel, the AI four light years away struggles to become the first non-human 'self'.

Bear's narrative never remains stationary, shifting voice and point of view, adapting techniques from Dos Passos borrowed for sf a generation ago by John Brunner in *Stand on Zanzibar*. You don't slip gracefully through this story; it's sometimes a slog. But the payoff is enormously satisfying. Bear is genuinely prodigious,

and his future assembles itself from a multitude of brilliant details, builds with a disturbing conviction.

Simultaneously, one is aware that this *is* a construct, a kind of artistic thought experiment that echoes the fundamental model of mind that Bear employs. That model is itself entirely up to date, drawn with remarkable fidelity from the cutting-edge cognitive psychology of, say, Marvin Minsky or Roger Schank.

Things come in at least threes; there are no brutal oppositions of right versus wrong. Self and Other are met halfway by the self's double. Human and machine AI are mediated by the transform. Crime is not opposed simply by punishment, but by therapy (and understanding). So the book is not merely the demonstration of an academic theorem; it has a heart: Minsky meets Dostoyevsky.

Queen of Angels is challenging, audacious, nothing if not ambitious. Despite some formidable competition, it is arguably the best sf novel of last year.

CRYSTAL EXPRESS
by Bruce Sterling
(Century/Legend; A$17.95)

Traditional literatures tell us: this is how things are, always have been, always will be. The crisis literature of the last century modified that message only a little: this is how things *should* be, and they're getting out of control, help!

Sf, by contract, takes change in its stride — not always relishing its surprises (few readers *enjoy* holocausts) but accepting their inevitability. Most mass-market fantasy tales retreat instead to a never-never world of magic, happy feudalism and dragons. Significantly, fantasy currently outsells sf by a hefty margin.

Bruce Sterling is a prophet of hyper-realist sf, fiction devoted to headlong change. Like William Gibson, Sterling has been a vociferous propagandist for 'cyberpunk', futurist writing that combines hard-edged, hi-tech gloss with a cynical posthumanist sensibility. His novel *Schismatrix* (1986) proposed a world hectically different from our own, but anchored in it, the species split into warring 'clades' while plunging toward a collective break with history to which even our strange descendants prove unequal.

That invented universe was first evoked in a series of gemlike stories, filigreed with complex detail work, set in the era of conflict between Shapers and Mechanists. In line with genetic research currently underway, the former literally remake themselves via DNA engineering, enhancing intelligence or intuition, beauty or longevity. The latter treat flesh as a disposable way station to cybernetic utopia, transcending biological limits with machined replacements.

Neither path is likely to appeal to twentieth-century readers, but Sterling's Posthumanist future is altogether convincing as a parable of unchecked change. Now those Shaper/Mechanist stories have been brought together in a rich collection.

But Sterling's mastery of sf extends well beyond this single vision of the future. *Crystal Express* falls into three intriguing sections. Following the *tour de force* of five Shaper/Mechanist tales, Sterling offers three unusually diverse sf worlds not from that suite, and rounds out his book with four classically devised fantasy tales (though thankfully there's not a dragon in any of them).

'The Beautiful and the Sublime' is a hilarious letter from a late twenty-first century Byron, reminiscent of Woody Allen's *Midsummer Night's Sex Comedy*. 'Flowers of Edo', a vivid parable of technology's Faustian temptation, is set in Tokyo in 1870, and presages the awful flames of Hiroshima. 'Dinner in Audoghast' finds its resonance in Calvino or Borges, shocking us with reversals of custom and belief in a smug African Muslim society long since lost to the desert sands.

Sterling's talent, though he might not like to hear it said, is perhaps our era's sf equivalent of Robert Heinlein's in the mid-century — fertile, unbounded, at once enthralling and subversive.

TIME AND AGAIN
by Jack Finney
(Legend; A$19.95)

Even for sf readers steeped in the lore of tomorrow, there's a greedy urge to relive the past as it should have been. Or even a suspicion that the past, warts and all, was *already* pretty much as it should have been. What a shame nasty science has deprived us of those wonderful Good Old Days!

Jack Finney thinks so, in the illustrated novel *Time and Again*, a classic time-travel tale no less apt today than when it was first published twenty years ago.

Finney's jaded young New York advertising illustrator Si Morley, unhappy in love and artistic ambition alike, is head-hunted by a secret US government project to investigate the past via a kind of nostalgia-driven ability to slip into the world of 1882. With agile skill, Finney milks this notion for all the sentiment it's worth, without getting gushy.

Robber-baron capitalism is at its peak. Fifth Avenue is as beautiful as Paris, nary a skyscraper in view. Kids and oldsters throw snowballs in Central Park without fear of mugging. Bold men and innocently ostentatious women dash through the streets in charming horse-drawn vehicles, their iron-shod wheels deafening on cobbles, undirected traffic turmoil lethal at the Broadway intersection. . . .

But Finney is no Norman Rockwell, saint of wistfulness. In a startling epiphany, Si learns from a freezing streetcar driver exactly how dreadful it is to be poor in this era. Caught in the inferno of a tinder-dry office building aflame in a world of rudimentary fire-fighting services, he has less cause to glorify the past. The legacy of Boss Tweed rules New York's criminal financiers.

Finally, Si must decide if he prefers this charming barbarism to the twentieth-century obsession with control that has poisoned air and water and fetched humanity to the brink of world self-destruction. It does not occur to him, it seems, that the latter is a direct outcome and extension of the former.

One final irony: Si's link between past and 1970s' present is a little-known apartment building on Central

Park West, the Dakota, shown again and again in the book in many of its wonderfully vivid period photographs and drawings. Finney was not to know, writing this fantasy, that a decade later John Lennon would be gunned down there; that for decades more, people throughout the world would recognize that great grey pile, and shudder.

USE OF WEAPONS
by Iain M. Banks
(Orbit/Macdonald); A$32.95)

British science fiction is rather in the doldrums, with one bright exception. After magisterial exertions in his vast 'Helliconia' series, Brian Aldiss has fallen very quiet. Ballard abandoned sf long since. Ian Watson, after a dazzling debut in the 1970s, has moved into the more lucrative horror field. John Brunner is hushed, Chris Priest unfrocked.

What pleasure, then, to regard Iain M. Banks, rising from these moribund hopes like a martial skirling of pipes.

Without the middle initial, he erupted into British letters in the mid-eighties with such brio that Fay Weldon dubbed him 'the great white hope of British Literature'. She had in mind *The Wasp Factory*, with its gristly psychopathic brilliance, and a handful of other technically adventurous mainstream titles. But Banks has also indulged a passion for sf in three meaty, superbly intelligent space opera thrillers.

Consider Phlebus, with its T. S. Eliot title and its gaudy tale of interstellar conflict, introduced a fully stocked universe as ample as anything in sf's alternative future histories.

The Player of Games stood back a little and developed the story of a single intellectual combatant in the endless conflict between Banks's machine-loving hedonistic Culture (good) and its foes (pretty nasty): brutality, credulous faith, political hierarchy, war.

Now he bridges the two with a drastically complex biography of a soldier taken from a world not unlike Czarist Russia and sent into the field again and again for centuries, supported with only the most ironic ambiguity by subtle Culture intelligences human and artificial. Frozen, he can be healed (if they reach him in time); decapitated, revived. A poisoned worm of memory remains hidden from sight, however, baffling the labyrinthine plans of even the Culture's most beguiling minds.

Banks somehow works a narrative miracle, a triumph of generic engineering, fusing thriller and moral parable, reeking detail and clinical distance, fanciful invention and heartfelt pain. Almost. Perhaps he is too consummate. *Use of Weapons* winds on itself like a double spiral. The main story carries us forward; its parallel runs backward, in leaps of traumatic memory recovered. In the end, all certitudes are broken. Anything may be used as a weapon, however personal, ugly, ruinous to the wielder. The novel is a coiled maze; many ways lead in, as many out, all of them refuting determinacy even as they insist upon it.

And for all that, the book's *fun*. Colossal artifacts with facetious names like the *Very Little Gravitas Indeed* roar across the galaxy, while enhanced humans and snide machines frolic within their protective fields. The happiest moment, exactly catching Banks's way of taking sf's geegaws and doing rude things with them, is this:

> 'To the Culture,' he said, raising his glass to the alien. It matched his gesture. 'To its total lack of respect for all things majestic.'

A CANTICLE FOR LEIBOWITZ
by Walter M. Miller Jr
Orbit/Hodder & Stoughton; A$32.95)

There's a horrid pertinence in this handsome re-issue of Walter Miller's masterpiece as the bombs fall in Iraq. A recent Gallup poll finds that 45 per cent of Americans favour the use of tactical nuclear weapons against Saddam's godless forces. Well, not 'godless', exactly. God, as usual, is readily pressed into service on behalf of all the warring parties.

In the middle 1950s, when the three novellas comprising this fine novel had their first publication, prospects of limited atomic war seemed entirely realistic. In 1961, when it was chosen best sf novel of the preceding year, American school kids practised 'duck and cover' for the big one.

Thirty years on, with *glasnost*, we had begun to admit our numbness as the first prickles of feeling returned. In the shadow of nuclear winter, atomic holocaust would be rather more comprehensive than strategic planners had hoped. But horror still dulls our sense of reality. One can find, next to the milk-bar lollies and ice creams, the obscene blaring headline: NUKE 'EM.

Among the benefits of science fiction is its ability to help us look such atrocities in the eye. All too often this terrible power is abused, and we see ultimate carnage portrayed with lip-smacking relish. For some few books, *A Canticle for Leibowitz* premier among them, moral complexity and a rich saving humour allow us to *feel* as well as think about the unthinkable.

Leibowitz is a Jewish electric engineer who survives World War III, taking shelter with monks. Adopting their faith, he founds an Order of 'bookleggers', priests and brothers sworn to preserve the scant memorabilia left after a frenzied *auto da fe* Simplification, a universal revulsion against all learning, especially science.

After 600 years, Brother Francis Gerard of Utah is led by an ancient pilgrim (perhaps, in a bleak metaphor, the resurrected and lingering Lazarus) to unearth blueprints that open a chink of light into the second Dark Age. Francis makes it his lifework to prepare an illuminated copy of an electric circuit:

> Because the meaning of the diagram itself was obscure, he dared not alter its shape or plan by a hair; but since its colour scheme was unimportant, it might as well be beautiful. He considered gold inlay for the squiggles and doohickii, but the thingumbob was too intricate for goldwork, and a gold quid would seem ostentatious.

Six centuries on, Newton's theories are rediscovered by a haughty pagan scholar from the new empire of Texarkana, and within two millennia of the first nuclear holocaust East and West are ready once more for universal devastation.

Abruptly, we find Brother Francis less comical in his error. He mistook the power of knowledge for the power of beauty, but his mistake failed to boil the living skin off billions of his fellows and poison even the fish in the deep oceans. . . .

The last Abbot muses on this eternal fall:

> 'When the world was in darkness and wretchedness, it could believe in perfection and yearn for it. But when the world became bright with reason and riches, it began to sense the narrowness of the needle's eye, and that rankled. . . .

Not an explanation available to a disbeliever in Original Sin, and one gathers that Miller himself had abandoned Catholicism by the time his novel was done. He then fell silent for thirty years, but is now completing his long- delayed sequel. Meanwhile, in Iraq and Israel, the bombing continues. Would the Abbot approve or not?

> To minimise suffering and to maximise security were natural and proper ends of society and Caesar . . . in seeking only them, we found only their opposites: maximum suffering and minimum security.

While it is nice to have this important work in hardcover once more, it's a pity the Macdonald editors did not pay more attention to their job. One of the wonderfully mysterious moments at the start of the book occurs when the pilgrim chalks his name on a rock for Brother Francis to find — the Hebrew letters *lameth* and *tzadhe*. L/Z: LeibowiTZ? LaZarus? These important letters have been carelessly dropped from the text on page 18, though they are inserted correctly on page 53.

Even more foolishly, the reset text carries over various literals from an earlier edition (they're in my ratty old Corgi paperback copy). On page 297, we read 'Whoever exalts a race or a State of a particular form of State', where the first 'of' is surely meant to be 'or'; on page 301, 'A drink of water? A drink of wind?' is not a strained metaphor but a typo for 'wine'; on page 321, 'whether the book was high intellectual comedy or more epigrammatic buffoonery', where it's rather likely to be 'mere' rather than 'more', no?

Perhaps this is the result of computer scanning, a grisly fate predicted quite aptly in the novel's third section, which denounces the Abominable Autoscribe, a diabolical device familiar to anyone with a word processor. . . .

PACIFIC EDGE
by Kim Stanley Robinson
(Unwin Hyman, A$29.95)

Introducing a recent interview with me on the SBS *Book Show*, Dinny O'Hearn remarked (more than once) that science fiction writers may be regarded as either perpetual adolescents or an intellectual elite. It was pretty clear which category he favoured. Andrea Stretton confessed her distaste for *Neuromancer*, the *noir* cyberpunk classic, partly on the basis of her Fear & Loathing of computers . . . presumably a mark of deep maturity.

Their assessment is wrong, though you can catch yourself thinking that way on gloomy days. Sf is not just a childhood virus that kids catch and throw off after a brief temperature. Nor is it the seminar room conducted by other means. It's an entire spectrum of narrative choices, an imaginative palette ranging from Ninja Turtles and Douglas Adams to Philip K. Dick and Olaf Stapledon. Dinny's dichotomy catches the ultraviolet and infrared, but loses the rainbow.

In any case, the very best sf does not repudiate extremes; it appeals to something eager and open within the crustiest adult heart even as it dazzles the mind with the riches of abstract knowledge and the hard, constrained ambitions of scientific practice.

And that's true even when it falsifies our current view of the universe — because science insists that we know very little, and will know a great deal more by and by.

So there's quite often something joyfully exuberant and romantic in sf, fatally kitschy to the cultivated. Like those heightened screen epics that star Charlton Heston or Kirk Douglas — Anthony Mann's *El Cid*, say, or Kubrick's *Spartacus* — sf may play with the consequences of huge change through the rhetoric of melodrama. But so does Wagner, and I don't find our cultural arbiters complaining about arrested adolescence as they pay through the nose for their opera tickets.

Kim Stanley Robinson's fine novel *Pacific Edge* evades any need for special pleading. His limpid,

sunny prose builds the most ordinary of utopias, as befits an imagined southern California in the summer of 2065. Green politics suffuses every minute of domestic life, which means it's an uphill battle against inertia, special interests, world poverty, the forgetfulness born of happiness in a land 'like a garden run riot'.

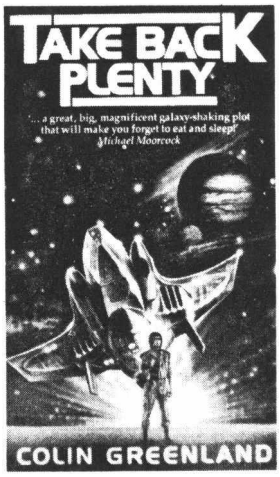
In its midst, a brooding note obtrudes from the first sentence: 'Despair could never touch a morning like this.' Like a moebius strip closing upon itself its twist skewing what we knew, it ends this way:

> If only Ramona, if only Tom, if only the world, all in him all at once, with the sharp stab of our unavoidable grief; and it seemed to him then that he was without a doubt the unhappiest person in the whole world.
>
> And at thought (thinking about it) he began to laugh.

Kevin is an artisan in a fairly brave new world, a bit thick, without the nous of his grandfather Tom Barnard who helped make the revolution back in 2012. *Pacific Edge* is a domestic study, a couple of months in the life of that most difficult feat, the *believable* utopia. No cosmic mysteries burst into its sweet tale, but a shadow falls ever and again across its bucolic ordinariness: the incipient fascism of an earlier cruel day (still in our own future), the world of excess and terror we're making at the end of the twentieth century.

Robinson's achievement is to show us both realities, and if we never quite learn how the one grew from the other, why, that is where the novel regains the actual, meets the reader, beckons us into making it true.

TAKE BACK PLENTY
by Colin Greenland
(Unwin; A$9.95)



In *The Entropy Exhibition*, Dr Colin Greenland's spirited 1983 study of British New Wave sf, he briskly depicted its dismal precursors. A typical tale of the early 1960s knew that 'Women in space, like women at sea, are trouble. . . . When their space-liner is wrecked, Miss Krand's hysterical demands for attention infuriate and imperil the other survivors until one of the men comes up with a solution. They lobotomise her.'

Scary stuff, such glimpses into yesterday's tomorrows. In his own riproaring space opera, *Take Back Plenty*, Greenland tears up the last traces of that old rule book in a nonstop romp that rejuvenates a kind of story- telling that hit its nadir in *Star Wars*, with its Air Ace in Space mock heroics.

His tongue is not exactly in his cheek because the medium he's colonized is over the top to start with, but he does not scruple to borrow back from Douglas Adams such wonderful absurdities as the Infinite Probability Drive (it takes you anywhere, but your engines are likely to turn into dead leaves or barking seals; you know the sort of thing).

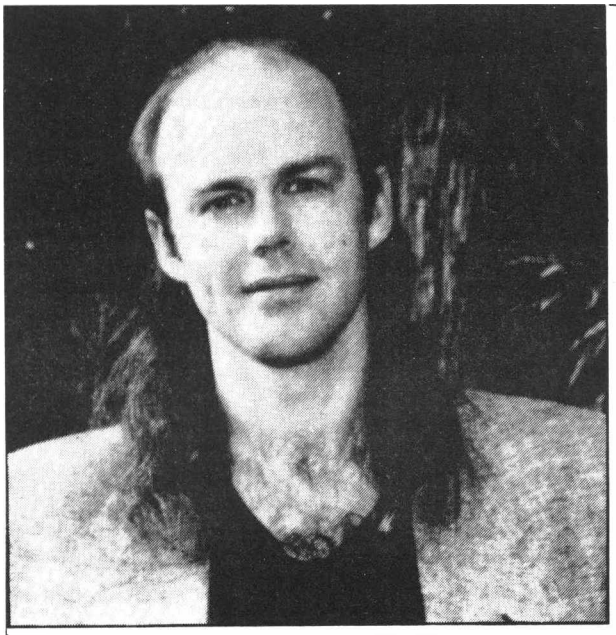
Tabitha Jute is a chunky, sexy, tough, competent but short-tempered driver of, well, space trucks. No sane man would take it into his head to lobotomize her, though inevitably she falls foul of several who try. With the aid of her trusty space truck *Alice Liddell*, a kind of mechanical *idiot savant*, she negotiates the wonderlands and looking-glass worlds of a solar system embargoes by the dread Capellans, whose giant smooth foreheads hide secrets that Woman Was Not Meant to Know.

There's a surprising measure of nuance, sense and sensibility in this goodnatured Space Extravaganza (as its subtitle candidly describes it). Yet it really is sf as childhood regained — marooned in the steaming jungles of Venus, chased by little critters along the dredged canals of Mars, visiting the speaking dead on the orbital habitat Plenty, captured and (I'm sorry to admit) raped by pirates flying something like a gigantic spiny cactus leaf, breaking the solar system free of the ghastly clutches of the Capellans, their dog-muzzled Eladeldi space cops, their Frasque foe who stare like mad trees. . . .

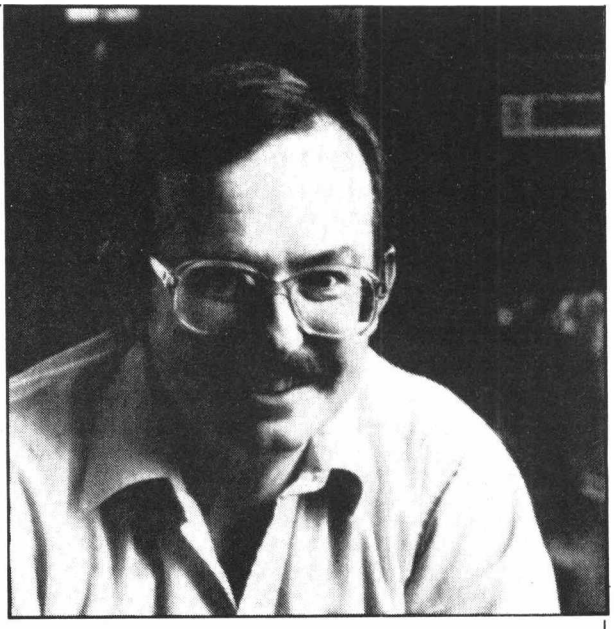
To tell you the truth, I kept drifting off and laying it aside. Even a *tour de force* of poker-faced parody that, yes, carries forward the classy space opera tradition of Delany's *Nova* and M. John Harrison's *The Centauri Device*, not to mention *Captain Miracle* on 3DB in the mid-1950s, even a rip-snorting generic resuscitation of cosmic proportions can get dull for a grown-up reader.

But what the hell, it undeniably fits Greenland's account of postmodern sf: 'It illuminates our enslavement to the idea of the future and to our own technology. It subdivides reality and adds provisional worlds, each flickering unsteadily, whose reflected light does not always draw our attention back to the source we know to be there.' Taken in bites, it's lush, demented, and fun.

— Damien Broderick, February 1991



TAD WILLIAMS



GREG BEAR

COLIN STEELE talked to **GREG BEAR** and **TAD WILLIAMS** at the Legends Conference in Sydney in July 1991, sponsored by Random Century.

THE LIMITS OF GENRE

Tad Williams and Greg Bear interviewed by Colin Steele

Tad Williams:

Colin Steele
Greg Bear has said that many fantasy readers are not sophisticated readers in any sense of the word. How do you react?

Tad Williams
When I talk about people writing 'comfort reading', I am not necessarily setting myself up as the exemplar of the opposite. I think there is an entire continuum of literature, and obviously the people who read Don de Lillo would probably feel that even the masters of the sf/fantasy genre are writing comfort literature.

I am not setting myself on top of any pyramid. But all the way down the line we can all look at what the rest of the field is, and try to place ourselves according to it. I think fantasy is, in part, comfort reading because it is still a fairly new commercial genre, and also because it was so dominated by Tolkien. Like romance novels, it has become very samey stuff. You see people time and time again using the same themes and running through them with some slight changes. That is, in fact, what the readers want and that is what they are paying for. However, this is true in virtually any commercial genre.

At the same time, in fantasy there is some really marvellous work going on, breaking the rules. One of the classic examples is Robert Holdstock. He doesn't follow any of the classic clichés of fantasy literature.

There is also some post-modernism in the field. You have people interpreting other fictional genres. An instance is Stephen Brust, whom I talk about all the time, who is doing film noir detective stuff in a fantasy genre very effectively, using humour.

I think it's dangerous to dismiss fantasy as comfort literature, since it's the very nature of a commercial genre. However, I don't think Moorcock or Holdstock or any of the people doing innovative work are necessarily selling worse that they ever were. What I think happens is that people enter fantasy via the journeyman fantasy work, and some of them grow up and are exposed to other kinds of literature, becoming a little more critical and beginning to look for other things. They will work their way up to reading really interest-

ing people such as Calvino.

CS
Michael Moorcock, in *The Fortress of the Pearl*, has an alleged subtext of an attack on Thatcherite Britain. Can fantasy contain strong political subtexts?

TW
Absolutely. Some people have said to me that because I play a little bit with word games, I'm commenting on Tolkien, but that's not my area of expertise at all. My area of expertise — if I have any at all, because I'm a complete amateur — is history and politics, and that comes out in my writing. It's not so much a political agenda, but I put forward a general philosophical outlook about politics and history; about the mutability of history; the unreliability of the public myth; and the need to educate oneself about the political world you live in.

Perhaps the commonest cliché of high fantasy is the young character who discovers himself. I'm doing a bit of that, but I'm also doing the young character who discovers that the world is essentially a fiction. What you believe is based largely on what you have been told and what you have experienced. The most commonly accepted fictions are not always closest to reality. So my main character learns not just who he is, but how the world really operates.

CS
Greg has said how history is written by the victors, and you are saying how perceptions of the past had changed.

TW
Absolutely. History is changed quite consciously by people whose interest it is to have a historical myth. God knows, if there are any two peoples who know about the power of a history myth, they are the English and the Americans.

CS
You and Greg Bear were both talking about the youthful audience. This surprised me, because at this conference the average age is over thirty; perhaps about forty. The science fiction community is getting middle aged; my fifteen-year-old son has just gone off to the city comic shops. I read in one of your earlier interviews that you said you might do a graphic novel at some stage.

TW
Yes. Actually Greg and I both might have a graphic novel negotiated through the same route of packager to publisher. One of the things that I wanted to do long before I dreamed of being a novelist was to become a comic artist and writer. I had grown up on comic books, and my only lament now is that in fact I stopped being involved in that apprenticeship just before the comic-book explosion.

One of the reasons that I stopped was because when I reached my mid-teens, comic books became quite boring to me. They had plateaued. It was about two or three years later that the explosion really began of the first graphic novels. Then underground comics became merged with the mainstream — really surrealistic stuff. I really lament not having stayed in comic books long enough to take advantage of that, but in a way I think maybe now I can come back and dabble in them.

CS
Because you are coming back from an angle above which you have much more artistic freedom?

TW
I hope so.

(Interposes Greg Bear: 'Maybe. Comic books don't have really much respect for the successful underwriter.')

CS
Have you read the new Stephen Donaldson sf novels?

TW
I haven't read the new ones. I am in two minds about reading them because I am trying to branch out a bit from straight fantasy myself. Apparently Donaldson and his publishers are learning that it is difficult to make the crossover. On the other hand, I am interested to see how a perceived fantasy writer does that.

I must confess I like a lot of the first Thomas Covenant books, although I had some very profound complaints about the direction they took. I lost interest in the second trilogy. Maybe unfairly, I thought that Donaldson had also lost interest in it a bit. Probably he had seen something happen that we would all love to happen to us: he was offered a lot of money to write a particular project.

However, it is really dangerous for a writer in our field to spend a lot of time doing the same thing. You and your fans calcify, and your reputation calcifies. When you do try to move — and this may be what's happening to him now — the people who have loved your work are very resentful because they have gotten quite used to what you are doing. The people who don't like your fantasy may be very hesitant to try your science fiction.

On the other hand, people such as Dan Simmons and Greg Bear have worked successfully in different genres.

Greg Bear

CS
In recent interviews you have referred several times to the laziness or lack of intellectual depth of science fiction critics, and asked how long before somebody like Edmund Wilson emerges in sf criticism. Could you expand on this?

Greg Bear
That was my initial reaction to the Leeds (UK) SF Conference and to another conference I attended at Riverside, California. I found that seven out of the eight papers presented there were academic masturbation. Critics, certainly the deconstructionists, come to think of themselves as artists. They see their duty to take books, disassemble them, not caring for what the author intended, and put them into a social context that was *their* artistic interpretation of the whole thing.

CS
What do you think of the general standard of criticism?

GB
I was quite refreshed by Michael Tolley's approach [in *Australian Science Fiction Review*] because he in fact enlightened me. He told me things that I had not thought about, and he brought new things to my attention. That is the role of a critic. The role of the critic is not to create, but to synthesize and explain. The critic, in my somewhat conservative view, is someone who is explaining, not necessarily doing the mulching and growing.

CS
Can you expand on this morning's comment about the youthfulness of Australian writing? We obviously get very twitchy here about a perceived lack of cultural depth, but it was interesting that you were comparing the 1930s in the USA with Australian sf today.

GB
I was talking about the levels of enthusiasm, sophistication and dedication, as compared to the dilletantism we get in American science fiction today.

CS
And you also give the impression that cynicism has become overwhelming in America.

GB
It is a kind of falling away from youthful enthusiasm. People have kind of lost their way and are now trying to think of themselves as being mature. Here I am mature; I don't need to be enthusiastic anymore. I can be jaded, I can hold a cigarette holder in my hand and act like the great literary writer and say, oh well, I don't want to do this, it is not terribly important to me — that sort of thing.

At this conference, the Australians I've met don't have this attitude, and it is something new to me. I see here a cell of the original enthusiasm that got me into science fiction, the enthusiasm that still empowers science fiction and fantasy today; the youthful, almost child-like enthusiasm that has nothing to do with sophistication. Also the wonderful sense of self-humour — not taking yourself seriously while at the same time keeping a deep commitment and enthusiasm. I don't see the little fan feuds between writers. If you say something offensive about someone they take it for what it means, bop you on the back, and buy you a cup of coffee.

CS
You have also said: 'I have religious elements in my books but they can't be understood in the standard fashion.'

GB
Yes, in the sense that they can't be applied in terms of Christianity or any established religion. Perhaps I am trying to make my own religion in the Campbell sense (Joseph, not John). I'm trying to find my own metaphysical beliefs through fiction.

CS
Would you see yourself as some form of social engineer? I'm referring to some of the themes of *Queen of Angels*.

GB
Social engineering is an accomplished fact; people try to do it all the time. But how well do they do it on a cultural level? The corporations are putting different social engineering skills into developing products for the marketplace, then finding the marketplace.

A psychiatrist working with an individual is a psychological engineer, but the complex individual is totally beyond the reach of engineering. It is an art form that sometimes seems to work. Sometimes it doesn't. The psychiatrist then becomes a kind of explorer into the self-awareness of the individual. The best psychiatrist, I think, is the person who sits there and listens while you explain yourself; the guide there to learn who you are, but doesn't know who you are.

What if we had a situation where we could understand the basics of how the human brain works so that we could fix it? If something went drastically wrong in somebody, we wouldn't know enough to reach a perfect cure. You would have casualties, as you do in surgery now. There would people who would not come out of it. The doctor has to face that. Perhaps what the psychological engineer did would take something valuable from the individual, perhaps the only thing that makes him or her an individual.

But I went into *Queen of Angels* thinking that this would be a good, because you are making people who are dysfunctional functional. That was my premise. What goes wrong, however, even to give that good? What goes wrong in the society? How would people react to it? How will people shy away from doing what is good for them? Why do people refuse to go to the doctor although they have serious illnesses that could be cured? They don't want to go to the doctor because they are afraid. How much more afraid would you be if you were afraid of losing yourself — not just your bodily sanctity but your mental sanctity? That was the basis of the plot in *Angels*: the opposition between the notion of the responsibility of the individual to know and cure him or herself, and the notion of the social ability to make somebody happy.

— Colin Steele, Tad Williams and Greg Bear.
Transcribed 23 December 1991

brg This piece was delivered as a talk to the October 1991 meeting of the Nova Mob, and nobody fell asleep. (Thank you, kind persons.) (The main complaint was that nobody could find copies of Carroll's books in order to read them before the meeting.) Good sense tells me that I should attempt to sell this as an article somewhere. But it's really only a preliminary survey of Carroll's novels — a sketch of what should have been — with only *The Land of Laughs* looked at in any detail. I'd like your letters of comment (please) before writing a longer version. A slightly different version of this article was published through ANZAPA.

Jonathan Carroll

Jonathan Carroll, Storyteller
by Bruce Gillespie

I

During the last few years I have been looking around for a new and interesting sf or fantasy author. Most of my favourite writers are either dead or currently off the boil. Most of the award-winning authors are bad writers; many of the good writers are insufferably long-winded.

What were my criteria in looking for a new and interesting writer?

To use a very unoriginal phrase, I was looking for stories that are really stories. These are stories told by someone with something so urgent to tell you that she or he pins you to the wall and tells the tale so vividly that you do not want to leave until you have heard every word.

I was looking for stories that are told concisely: stories that are only as long as need be, or perhaps a bit shorter than that. Thick books have become the plague of sf during the last twenty years.

I was looking for stories that are made up principally of events, characters, places, sights, sounds and smells; stories in which the author does not generalize for the reader.

I sought stories that tell you wonderful things you've never heard before, but can upset your expectations. 'Astonish me!' as Harlan Ellison is supposed to have said many years ago.

I was prepared to mix genres when looking for this interesting author. My favourite book for the year so far is James Morrow's *Only Begotten Daughter*, which mixes sf and fantasy categories in an exuberant way. During recent years, my ideal for the modern story is the category I would call the 'urban fantasy' — realistic fiction in which events are gradually invaded by elements of the fantastic. Tom Disch called this category 'tales of unease'. These are stories that are about one's own world, but in which the perspective is twisted so that you see the world quite differently from the way you saw it before.

There must be someone new, I thought, who meets most or all of these criteria.

The clue came from a review that I published myself. Dave Langford is the reviewer I have to thank. In *SF Commentary* 68, some of Dave Langford's review columns from the English *GM* magazine appeared under the title 'Critical Hits'. This is what he wrote:

> Jonathan Carroll is an author who deserves your attention despite, or because of, being weirdly difficult to classify. You could call his books psychological-fantasy-mystery-horror stories, with an elusive magic in the writing and vivid characters reminiscent of the larger-than-life creations of the late Theodore Sturgeon. Carroll's first, *The Land of Laughs*, baffled publishers and suffered from desperately misleading cover designs: the American paperback resembled a twee, Oz-style children's book, the British one looked like routinely grotty horror. More sensibly, his present publishers have opted for colourfully surreal jackets on *Bones of the Moon* — one of my 1987 Best books — and the latest, *Sleeping in Flame*.
>
> This time, Carroll's favourite elements emerge quickly enough: a setting in Vienna (where he lives), a relish for life, places and food, a moving second-time-around love affair . . . and something nasty in the woodshed. The blackness from the hero's past has such weird ramifications that few writers could have made it work: our man's life seems prefigured by past incarnations going back to a bit-part from the Brothers Grimm, his diminutive father may or may not be a famous character with a very silly name, and the conclusion is an outrageous psychological rabbit punch. I'll read this one again.
>
> (p. 15)

It's hard to specify what in that review made me determined to track down the books by this author. Perhaps it was Dave Langford saying 'I'll read this one again.' Perhaps it was that reference to Vienna. I don't know of any other American writers who live in Vienna. Perhaps I was looking for outrageous psychological rabbit punches. Little did I know how outrageous. . . .

II

Luckily the first Carroll novel I found was *The Land of Laughs*, his first published novel. It meets all of my criteria.

It is the right length: 241 pages, about 70,000 words. Not many fantasy authors today can restrict themselves to a length under 300 pages.

It is an 'urban fantasy': it begins with some seemingly ordinary yuppies on the east coast of America, progresses to the heartland of America, and doesn't begin to get weird until half way through the book.

Its style is admirably restricted to the places, events, sights, sounds and rather hectic observations of the narrator. The author has other things on his mind, but you have to work them out for yourself. This book is

unputdownable, which I suppose is my one basic criterion for any good book.

And by its end, it is a novel the pulls the rug from under all the reader's expectations.

A bonus is the unnamed cover artist of most of the Legend paperback editions. These covers are irresistible, with their combination of surrealism, menace, wit, and a vivid sense of colour and design.

In discussing Jonathan Carroll, one must begin with his sense of style and flair for drama. Last week I heard on radio Professor Stephen Knight speculating about why the novels of the Sydney thriller writer Peter Corris had improved recently. I paraphrase him: 'Perhaps it's because he's been writing film scripts recently; he's learned to enter a scene late and leave early.' The mysterious Jonathan Carroll, who admits only to living in Vienna, seems to have had some film experience, since three of his novels are directly concerned with film-making. And I've found few other authors who know better how to enter a scene late and leave early.

Here's the beginning of *The Land of Laughs*:

> 'Look, Thomas, I know you've probably been asked this question a million times before, but what was it really like to be Stephen Abbey's — '
>
> '— Son?' Ah, the eternal question. I recently told my mother that my name isn't Thomas Abbey, but rather Stephen Abbey's Son. This time I sighed and pushed what was left of my cheesecake around the plate. 'It's very hard to say.'
>
> (LL, p. 1)

In with both feet, in the middle of a conversation, in the middle of a question and, as it turns out, into the middle of a main theme of the novel. Within a few pages we learn that Thomas Abbey's father had been a famous Hollywood actor, that he was dead, that evading his memory is one of the main preoccupations of his son. Thomas Abbey is a bored teacher. We overhear the middle of a conversation is between him and an unnamed girl. He chats her up, and takes her back to his apartment, which is filled with exotic masks. The first section ends:

> 'But they're just so *creepy!* How can you sleep in here with them? Don't they scare you?'
>
> 'No more than you do, my dear.'
>
> That was that. Five minutes later she was gone and I was putting some of the linseed oil on another mask.
>
> (LL, pp. 4)

Carroll doesn't muck around. In three pages you learn more about Thomas Abbey and his family and his preoccupations than you learn about the characters of most novels in the first twenty pages. Carroll puts his characters on stage, vivid, talking, interesting.

In those first few pages, you also catch a glimpse of an important minor theme: the importance of masks and puppets. It becomes very important in this novel to discover who is the puppet and who is pulling the strings.

In the first line of the novel, Carroll has already declared his first major theme: Abbey's inability to deal with the memory of his father. On page 4 we are told straight out the second major theme:

> My dream was to write a biography of Marshall France, the very mysterious, very wonderful author of the greatest children's books in the world. Books like *The Land of Laughs* and *The Pool of Stars* that had helped me to keep my sanity on and off throughout my thirty years.
>
> (LL, p. 4)

That one paragraph determined that I would not put down this book until I had finished it. The reason why I appreciate Jonathan Carroll's books is that he speaks directly for me, and presumably to lots of others as well. What is most important in life? Good stories and beautiful books. This will be a story about story-telling. Already we feel endless possibilities opening up. The search for a mysterious author. The reasons why a novel contains in it a novel with the same name as itself. The author seats you on the edge of a precipice above an unexplored valley, waiting to slither down the side and start exploring.

Thomas Abbey quickly returns to his major theme. He received *The Land of Laughs* as a present from his father on his ninth birthday:

> I sat in the car because I knew that was what my father wanted me to do and read the book from cover to cover for the first time. When I refused to put it down after a year, my mother threatened to call Dr. Kintner, my hundred-dollar-a-minute analyst, and tell him that I wasn't 'cooperating.' As always in those days, I ignored her and turned the page.
>
> 'The Land of Laughs was lit by eyes that saw the lights that no one's seen.'
>
> (LL, p. 5)

So Marshall France seems to be worthy of Thomas Abbey's devotion. Now to find out secrets about him.

The psychology of obsession is a major theme of all Carroll's novels, particularly the obsession needed by writers or film-makers or artists or architects to create something great. Thomas Abbey's obsession is to become the biographer of Marshall France. This obsession leads him, via a Marshall France rare volume, to Saxony Gardner, a woman whose obsession with the dead author is as strong as his. Together, he and Saxony discover that Marshall France is dead, but that his daughter Anna still lives in the small Missouri town of Galen, where the author died. Marshall France's publisher warns Thomas and Saxony not to bother going to Galen, since Anna will not talk to them. They go anyway.

If you haven't read the book, you would be annoyed to have the story recounted to you. If you've read the book, you will realize that it is *all* story, that there is no detail in the book that does not relate to the major themes of the book and does not contribute to its forward movement. And the ending, when you reach it, sends you straight back to beginning. Therefore I must discuss some of the secrets that Thomas Abbey learns, and try to make sense of some of the secrets of Jonathan Carroll.

In *The Land of Laughs*, as in most of the other books, the main character oscillates between two lovers. Saxony and Thomas arrive in Galen, Missouri, as a research team. They are welcomed, not rejected, by the townspeople. Thomas is more than welcomed by Anna France, the daughter of the dead author. She lives alone in a house that is filled with France memorabilia. The process of auditioning the new biographer quickly turns into seduction.

As in the other novels, the result is curiously non-sexy. Perhaps Carroll is merely careful of his American audience. His whole emphasis is on choice. Abbey is quite willing to be loved by both women, and he is

aware that eventually he must make his choice, but he also wants everything anyone offers him. The possibility that Anna might be using him for non-amatory purposes does not occur to him. The problem is made worse when Saxony, wounded by Thomas's betrayal, leaves the town temporarily. *She* has been his muse, not Anna, and it is she who is necessary to his work.

The Land of Laughs is a modern adult fairy-tale, and as in any fairy-tale, the hero must undergo a series of tests. First he must produce a first chapter that satisfies the standards of Anna. He must prove that he is just as obsessed as she is by Marshall France's work.

When he passes the literary test, he must pass new tests, the nature of which remains puzzling even to the reader until the end of the book.

> Early morning in Galen, Missouri. A few cars drove by, and I yawned. Then a little kid passed, licking an ice-cream cone and running his free hand along the top of Mrs. Fletcher's fence. Tom Sawyer with a bright green pistachio cone. I dreamily watched him and wondered how anyone could eat ice cream at eight o'clock in the morning.
>
> Without looking either way, the boy started across the street and was instantly punched into the air by a pickup truck. The truck was moving fast, so he was thrown far beyond the view from our window. When he disappeared, he was still going up. . . .
>
> The driver was out of the truck and stooped over the body. The first thing I saw when I got there was the green ice cream, half-covered with dirt and pebbles and already beginning to melt on the black pavement. . . .
>
> 'Is there anything I can do? I'll call an ambulance, okay? I mean, you stay here and I'll go call the ambulance.'
>
> The man turned around, and I recognized him from the barbecue. . . .
>
> 'All this is *wrong*. I knew it, though. Yeah, sure, go get that ambulance. I can't tell nothin' yet.' His face was pinched and frightened as hell, but the tone of his voice was what surprised me. It was half-angry, half-self-pitying. There was no fear there at all. No remorse either. . . .
>
> 'Joe Jordan! It wasn't supposed to be you!'
>
> Mrs. Fletcher had come up from behind us and was standing there with a pink dish towel in her hand.
>
> (LL, pp. 89–90)

With that one line, 'Joe Jordan! It wasn't supposed to be you!', Carroll changes Thomas's and our perception of the town. As Thomas Abbey observes, Galen, Missouri looks like a picture painted by Norman Rockwell, the sentimental portrayer of small-town American life. Galen is a small American midwestern town preserved from the 1940s. It feels like a town out of a 1940s movie. But in some way that neither the main character nor we can work out, people from the town see things quite differently from the way out-of-towners do. A child has died, but Joe Jordan the driver was not supposed to be the killer. What is going on?

I will have to tell you, in order to discuss the book as a whole. *The Land of Laughs* is based on one major idea. In Anna France's words: 'Marshall France had discovered that when he wrote something, it happened: it was: it came into being. Just like that.'

So the main attraction of *The Land of Laughs*, apart from its highly readable style and vivid characters, is that it is based on a what-if principle. What if a writer found that anything he or she wrote came true? It's rather like the what-if idea of Ursula Le Guin's *The Lathe of Heaven*: what if a person's dreams came true and somebody found a way to manipulate those dreams? In Le Guin's book, the creator is a naïve person who is manipulated by the psychiatrist who wants to save the world through his main character's dreams. Marshall France, on the other hand, has no interest in the rest of the world. Instead he protects himself through art. In Carroll's book, the observer is the naïve one.

When Marshall France discovered his ability, he chose to write down the fates of the people of Galen, Missouri, for the next thousand years. He made the town itself into his own great work. Through his writing, gradually he moved all the real people away from the town, and replaced them with people he invented. He filled vast notebooks with details of these people and their lives. There was one difficulty; Marshall France died. After several years, the story he had written started to come unstuck. Things start to happen that were not predicted. Anna decides to return the town to normality by finding a biographer who can recreate the spirit of Marshall France by writing a great biography of him. Thomas Abbey, as the writer, and Saxony Gardner, as his muse, are to be the saviours of the town. Except, in the nastiest touch of the novel, Thomas does not tell Saxony what is going on.

It would take hours to unpack the implications of this parable. It's enough to say that Jonathan Carroll has thought of a wonderful fantasy idea, then takes it for a walk, then takes it for a very long hike. His narrator, Thomas Abbey, is always a bit behind the action. He's too busy worrying about his women, and his book, and his self-importance, to notice the implications of the fable. One example, from one of the greatest scenes I've read for years:

> 'Uh, Larry, what does it feel like to be . . . uh, created?'
>
> Larry farted and smiled at me. 'Created? What d'ya mean, created? Look, man, you shot out of your old man, right?' I nodded and shrugged. 'Well, I just shot out of someplace else. You want another beer?'
>
> Catherine petted her gray rabbit as gently as if it were made of glass. 'Created? Hmm. That's a funny word to use. Created.' She rolled it around her tongue and smiled down at the rabbit. 'I don't really think about it, Thomas. There's always so much else on my mind.'
>
> If I was expecting answers from the Inner Sanctum, I didn't get them. Galen was a lower-middle-class town in the heart of Missouri, made up of hardworking people who went bowling on Wednesday night, loved *The Bionic Woman*, ate ham sandwiches, and were saving up to buy new Roto-tillers or a vacation cottage out on Lake Tekawitha.
>
> The most interesting anecdote I heard was from a guy who accidentally shot his brother in the face with a police revolver. The trigger pulled, the gun exploded, smoke, lots of noise . . . but nothing happened to the brother. . . .
>
> The more people I asked, the more it seemed that the vast majority were content with France's 'way,' and horrified that suddenly, cruelly, they had

been turned over to the clumsy hands of fate.

(LL, pp. 192–3)

We all think about our own creation, or rather, the difference between the time we were not alive and the time we remember being alive, but I know of no other depiction of characters who calmly consider the possibility they were written into existence. Again we consider: what does this say about the author and the man who is supposed to be his biographer? Why did a man who, after he discovered his own power, use it merely to create a small town of the absolutely and endlessly mundane? Why did he not create one of the fabulous worlds that came from his children's novels? Abbey fails to ask this question, because to ask it would be to admit that he does not know Marshall France at all.

The penultimate scene is quite brilliant, all the more so for its compactness. Thomas is the last to realize the real reason the townspeople want the biography written, which is, that in doing so, he will resurrect the writer. After several months of effort, he reaches the page in the biography that tells of the day Marshall France first arrived by train in Galen, Missouri. No train has visited Galen in many years. Yet all the townspeople gather at the station. On the horizon can be heard the sound of a train whistle. I will tell no more of the end; it's a potent mixture of irony, melodrama, humour and horror.

But without telling you the exact events of the ending, I do need to discuss its implications. In the scene I quoted from, Carroll the author appears to be merely whimsical, with more than a touch of the metaphysical: Marshall France as God; Thomas Abbey and Saxony Gardner as the unwitting prophets who save him through writing the biography. In depicting the gathering of the townspeople at the station, Carroll recalled for me yet another image: that of the deliriously happy German burghers who were always greeting Adolf Hitler in 1930s German propaganda films. Fascism can take many forms. Marshall France knew he would die. He knew he could create the town. Could he then write his own resurrection? My guess, never confirmed in the novel, is that France had written down the visit by Thomas and Saxony and the writing of the biography, in order to bring himself back as absolute ruler of his own tinpot kingdom. As we discover, his two saviours would then be dispensable.

The very last scene takes place some time later. Thomas manages to escape from Galen. Several years later, one of the residents of Galen, hot on his trail, finds him in a European town and is about to murder him. The last five lines of the book are:

> When Richard was five or six feet away, Pop stepped out of the pitch dark behind him and said lightly over my shoulder, 'Want me to hold your hat for you, kiddo?'
>
> I screamed with laughter and shot right into the middle of Richard's sad, astonished face.
>
> (LL, p. 241)

Sometime after he left Galen, Thomas Abbey had realized the implications of Marshall France's resurrection: that France was not a benign god, but a loony absolute dictator; that Marshall France, by blessing Thomas Abbey with his own powers for his own purposes, had also conferred on him a gift that Abbey needed in his own life. Whatever Thomas Abbey wrote from now on would also come true. And when he realizes this, he uses his powers to write the biography he had always run away from: that of his father. And therefore he has been able to resurrect his father. Which takes us right back to the first paragraph of the book. Thomas Abbey's role in life is to get to know his own father, and ultimately bring him back to life.

III

That is how I discovered Jonathan Carroll, whose first novel, *The Land of Laughs*, meets all my criteria of a good story. Could the same author produce another novel as interesting as his first?

The answer is no. Jonathan Carroll does not seem to have realized the central strength of *The Land of Laughs*: its what-if idea. Works of urban fantasy need the same strong backbone as great works of science fiction. To work satisfactorily, they need to say: what if the following aspect of our world were entirely different? It's no good having too many what-if ideas; perhaps one is enough for any book. But that one idea be a strong skeleton in which you can hang every bone and tissue of the rest of the body. Carroll's later books have strong bones and tissues, but fragile skeletons.

Not that I've given up Jonathan Carroll's books in disgust. Far from it. He still meets my *other* criteria of a good story.

All of his other books are about the right length; the shortest just under 200 pages, and the longest is 268 pages. All of them show signs of intense pruning. Although all of them are narrated in the first person and retain a chatty style, the chattiness is itself a mask for packed narratives in which every element is essential to the whole. Often you think characters are merely yabbering, when actually they are telling something you must know to make sense of the rest of the book.

All of his books begin at a gallop and don't slow down to the last page. Admittedly, not all of them start with anything as effective as the first line of *A Child Across the Sky*:

> An hour before he shot himself, my best friend Philip Strayhorn called to talk about thumbs.
>
> (CAS, p. 11)

If you guess that Philip Strayhorn, though dead at the beginning of the book, remains a main character in it, you would be correct.

The first line of *Sleeping in Flame* is:

> It took me less than half a lifetime to realize regret is one of the few guaranteed certainties.
>
> (SIF, p. 1)

Apart from being a theme of all Carroll's novels, this line points you so directly to the end of the book that you feel you ought to read the last page first. Not that that would tell you anything meaningful. Instead you must read the book once, knowing already that the last page will send you straight back to the first.

The first line of *Voice of our Shadow*, Carroll's second novel is:

> Formori, Greece
> At night here I often dream of my parents.
>
> (VS, p. 3)

I don't have time to give separate little talks about Carroll's later novels. From book to book the narrative voice has developed and and gained in confidence. The main character of *Voice of our Shadow* is, like Thomas Abbey of *The Land of Laughs*, a fairly ordinary bloke who runs foul of not only his parents but also his brother. Like *The Land of Laughs*, *Voice of our*

Shadow is a straightforward realist novel for about half its length. Again we are back in middle America; again we hear a lot about a whole load of seemingly unwarranted guilt. Again, it takes much of the book for Carroll to flash his magic effects.

From the third novel onwards, we meet a series of characters who are all minor characters in the others' stories. They are habitués of the Spider Club, a Los Angeles dinner club dedicated to the telling of good stories. These characters are decidedly upmarket from those of the first two novels, perhaps reflecting a newfound prosperity for their author. Weber Gregston, the narrator of *A Child Across the Sky* and a main character in *Bones of the Moon*, is a famous film-maker who has dropped out of the Hollywood system in order to direct a New York theatre group called the Actors Cancer Theatre. Walker Easterling, the main character in *Sleeping in Flame* and a minor character in *Outside the Dog Museum*, is a famous actor. Harry Radcliffe, featured in the most recent novel *Outside the Dog Museum*, is nothing less than the world's greatest architect.

In this way, the so-called 'everyday realities' of Carroll's novels are becoming less and less like our own — more glamorous, more fantastic — and therefore losing some credibility. If fantasy is to astonish us by entering our world, our world needs to be sufficiently mundane to represent a contrasting milieu.

Why then, do the magic effects work at all? In each of his novels, Carroll follows a basic procedure: the main characters meet, fall in love, usually after one or both of them has been deeply involved with somebody else, and enter a time of unalloyed bliss. This is the giveaway: if you read a passage about unalloyed bliss in a Carroll novel, you know something pretty ghastly or weird is about to happen. In *Bones of the Moon*, Cullen and Danny James have no sooner returned from a deliriously happy honeymoon in Europe and Cullen finds she is pregnant, than she begins to suffer from weird dreams. In *Sleeping in Flame*, Walker Easterling has no sooner met the love of his life, Maris York, and decided to set up house in Vienna than he experiences *this:*

> Vienna is a city where most people go to bed at ten o'clock. You rarely see anyone walking around past midnight, and those you do see are usually going home. . . . A cafe down the street was still open, so I decided on a quick brandy there, and then home.
>
> As I was walking in that direction, a figure suddenly loomed into sight before me further along the pavement. It took a moment for me to see it was a man riding a bicycle. The bike was completely decked out in a mad glittering jumble of streamers, mirrors, saddlebags, bumper-stickers, antennas, and everything else. The man had a long Rip van Winkle beard. He wore one of those round fur hats that cover most of the head and ears and remind you of woodcutters in Alaska. Pedalling hard enough to make the bike sway from side to side, he came flying towards me as if death (or sanity) were right behind him. The street was completely quiet but for the whizzing sounds of the bike, and the man's loud breathing. I was so tired that I didn't know whether to step left or right to avoid him. He kept coming and I kept standing there. As he got closer I saw more and more of his features. His face was lined and scored. A long and narrow stalactite of a nose hung above a mouth (he seemed to be smiling) full of dark teeth that went in every direction. I still hadn't moved when he was ten feet away and coming fast.
>
> 'Rednaxela! Welcome!' he shouted as he passed within inches of my feet — so close that I could smell his garlic, sweat, and craziness. He didn't look back once he'd passed, just drove straight up to the corner, a sharp right there, and . . . gone.
>
> (SIF, pp. 53–4)

Surprising, yes? Vivid, certainly. And as yet, completely unexplained. At this point of the novel, Easterling does not even realize that magic events are about to cascade down upon him. And for much of the novel, these events will go entirely unexplained.

This is what troubles me about all the novels other than *The Land of Laughs*: the arbitrariness of the magic employed. The strength of *Land of Laughs* is that Thomas Abbey has gone looking for his magic; he gets what he deserves. The main character of *Voice of our Shadow*, however, cannot possibly deserve the original and ghastly fate that Carroll has lined up for him. And why do the innocent characters in *The Land of Laughs* and *Bones of the Moon* suffer worse than other characters?

The magic tricks work because they are always surprising. On the one hand, they are surprising because Carroll remains various and experimental in his choice of tricks. Also, I suspect he knows a vast amount of folklore and religious arcana that I've never read. On the other hand, his mundane realities are so detailed and interesting that they provide a strong backdrop to the magic tricks.

In *A Child Across the Sky*, Weber Gregston reads a story written by Philip Strayhorn, the film-maker whose death began the book. The story, called 'Mr Fiddlehead', is about a woman whose childhood made-up friend Mr Fiddlehead comes to life when she is an adult. In turn, this story was based on the experience of Strayhorn himself, whose childhood made-up guardian angel, called Pinsleepe, has been his companion during his last months on earth. Here is what happens when Gregston returns to Strayhorn's house in California:

> I turned off the motor and sat a while listening to the quiet. Cheerful birds, the busy hiss of insects, a distant car driving off. There were the blooming cactus we'd planted together when he first moved into the house. From the car I could look through one of the front windows and see some of the objects in the living room.
>
> Something moved in there.
>
> I sat up straight in my seat.
>
> Something showed for a moment in the window and then disappeared as quickly. A head? A child hopping across the line of vision of the window? I couldn't tell. No child belonged in the house of a man three days dead.
>
> There it was again. Jumping. It *was* a child. Short hair. Yellow shirt. Waving hands in the air as it bounced past. . . .
>
> I went to the door and did the necessary twists and turns to de-activate the alarm. I was curious about who or what was inside, not afraid. Too curious about who or what was inside, not afraid. Too much had happened to cause any more fear. An explanation of some kind

was near and I was hungry to know it. . . .

At first I thought it was a seven(?)-year-old boy, the dark hair was cut so short, but the singing voice was the high and delicate bell of a little girl.

Barefoot, she skipped around the room in a pair of bluejean overalls and a yellow shirt. The longer I looked at her, the more I realized she was a *real* beauty. . . .

The beauty part slid away when I saw how misshapen her stomach was. Under the overalls it looked like she was hiding a basketball. She kept looking at me until she knew I was staring at her stomach. Then she stopped in the middle of the floor and took off the jeans and shirt. She was pregnant. . . .

'You're Pinsleepe, aren't you?'

'Yes.'

I didn't know what more to say. She was Pinsleepe the angel. The angel that had come to Phil before he died and told him to stop making the *Midnight* films because they were evil.

(CAS, pp. 90–2)

Here is a pretty good illustration of Carroll's strengths as a story-teller. The prose is matter-of-fact, but the effect is to bundle together a variety of experiences and levels or reality. The effect on the reader is to make us ask: what the hell can possibly happen next? Carroll plays with all our assumptions: about children, who are not supposed to be pregnant; about magical beings, who are supposed to be ethereal; about Californian suburban bungalows, which are supposed to be dull and suburban. The effect is to keep pulling the carpet out from under the reader.

Carroll even made fun of his own approach in his latest novel, where he has Harry Radcliffe say:

> Lately life had been like a Wild Mouse ride at an amusement park; whipped from one extreme to the other, there'd barely been enough time to gulp a quick breath before the next dip, twist or flip had me loop-de-looped or upside-down, trying to figure out where I was and how to see things from these constantly new perspectives.
>
> (ODM, page 136)

In the end, one always returns to the problem: where is the centre of a Jonathan Carroll novel? The details of Carroll's books are dazzling, the characters live, the magic tricks and characters remain interesting, and in some cases as tragic as the humans. But why? Why magic? Why not simply write dazzling satirical novels about Los Angeles, New York and Vienna?

Because — and I say this having no way of finding out from the author whether it is true or not — I suspect that at some deep level Carroll's novels are autobiographical. Magic is as real for Carroll as so-called ordinary reality. In most of his novels he takes reincarnation as a given. These days he tends to drops the name of God into his books, without giving much idea of which or whose God. It's hard to empathize with some of the zanier assumptions that he slips under the nose of the reader. There is one assumption with which I can empathize: that the most important magic is that of story-telling itself. Much of the magic in his novels comes into being because somebody tells a story or writes down a story. Magic is what we do when we write fiction.

But, I would have to say, authors choose to write their stories, much as Marshall France chose to create the people of Galen, Missouri. In the other Carroll novels, people don't have much choice in the matter. Magic is not sweet and wish-fulfilling in the Jonathan Carroll scheme of things. It falls upon his characters like a curse. Only in his most recent novel does he give Harry Radcliffe the choice of receiving or rejecting magic. Innocent characters are particularly hard-hit: Eliot and Cullen in *Bones of the Moon* and Saxony Gardner in *The Land of Laughs*. In some of the novels, the main character finds out how to break the spell, only to find that breaking a spell invokes yet another curse. Hence the 'psychological rabbit punch' endings.

If magic is supposed to be a metaphor for life itself, Carroll would seem to believe that life is grossly unfair or, worse, maniacally arbitrary. But this trend in his writing contrasts with his enjoyment of life. Surely his characters deserve something slightly more palatable than the fates he deals out to them?

As yet there is no satisfactory answer to these questions. As yet there are no Jonathan Carroll experts to give us neat academic answers. I wouldn't miss Carroll's novels, but I find much in the later novels to be dismaying, or even distressing. The ending of *A Child Across the Sky* is dazzling, but I don't understand what happens. I think I understand the ending of *Sleeping in Flame*, but rather wish Jonathan Carroll wouldn't keep playing such nasty tricks on the last pages of his books. But I still feel that Carroll is a romantic, desperately caring about worlds that keep slipping out of control. I keep hoping that his story-telling instincts will eventually win out over his instinct for chaos. In other words, may he one day return to the elegance of structure and expression that makes *The Land of Laughs* one of the finest fantasy novels ever written.

Editions used:
L: *The Land of Laughs* (first published 1980) Legend 0-09-939260-7. 1989. 241 pp.
VS: *Voice of our Shadow* (first published 1983) Arrow 0-09-937780-2. 1984. 189 pp.
BM: *Bones of the Moon* (first published 1987) Legend 0-09-949870-7. 217 pp.
SIF: *Sleeping in Flame* (first published 1988) Legend 0-09-957540-X. 1989. 244 pp.
CAS: *A Child Across the Sky* (first published 1989) Legend 0-09-970950-3. 1990. 268 pp.
ODM: *Outside the Dog Museum* (first published 1991) Macdonald 0-356-19589-9. 244 pp.

— Bruce Gillespie, 30 September 1991

I hadn't heard from ROS GROSS for more than ten years when suddenly she sent me the Guy Gavriel Kay reviews that you will find in 'Criticanto'. Now married, with children, she is returning to writing after too many years of not writing. Next she sent me the following article; perhaps she has also returned to writing fiction.

Diana Wynne Jones: An overview

by Roslyn K. Gross

Roslyn K. Gross discusses the following books by Diana Wynne Jones (bibliographic details included in the text):

Witch Week
The Ogre Upstairs
Cart and Cwidder
Archer's Goon
The Spellcoats
The Lives of Christopher Chant
Charmed Life
The Time of the Ghost
The Homeward Bounders
Fire and Hemlock
Howl's Moving Castle

No one writes like Diana Wynne Jones: she is a complete original. She fits into no tradition of fantasy writing that I know of, unless the British tendency to produce writers of startling originality can be considered a tradition. Her highly imaginative, funny, hugely enjoyable novels began appearing in 1974, winning various literary awards through the seventies and eighties.

Not only does she write a unique, underivative brand of fantasy but every one of her novels is an original, too. One could easily assume at first glance that her novels were all written by different writers, so different do they appear, at least on the surface. While some of them form a loose series, and several of them are set in the same universe, there is an immense variation in content, setting, atmosphere and tone in her work.

I

The novels of Diana Wynne Jones can be grouped into very loose categories, with much overlapping and blurring. (She has also, by the way, written short stories, plays for children and a novel for adults.) A few, like *Chairperson*, *Wild Robert* and *Who Got Rid of Angus Flint?*, are clearly aimed at younger children (perhaps the seven-to-ten age bracket), and a few others, like *A Tale of Time City*, *Fire and Hemlock* and *Howl's Moving Castle*, would appeal most to much older children, adolescents and, of course, adults who love fantasy literature.

But most of her novels — and this would include such works as *Witch Week and The Magicians of Caprona*, could find an audience among any or all of these readers.

And, as is the case with all truly great fantasy, her books can be appreciated on different levels of complexity and depth. Always they are totally engaging tales of mystery and magic, filled with surprising and unpredictable happenings that feel completely believable and real. But, beneath all the variety and fertile profusion of her work, there can be culled several common themes and approaches that make up the writer's vision, her unique way of viewing the world.

Life, in all of Jones's novels, is an exciting, mysterious and delightful puzzle for the main characters to solve. On one level a Jones novel is a kind of fantasy detective story. Nearly always at the beginning we are presented with a mystery that widens as the novel progresses, and becomes extremely complicated, sometimes to the point of hilarity. Yet somehow this immensely complicated web of events is spun and woven in Jones's skilful hands into resolution that feels obvious and fated all along. The sudden twists and surprises that result from this snowballing effect are both gripping and humorous. Beneath all this activity lies Jones's perception of life as endlessly rich and fascinating, of people as endlessly complex and diverse.

Jones is an astute observer of people, and is able to bring them, both children and adults, to a detailed and concrete aliveness on the page. She is able, for example, to portray the funny, sad, confusing, chaotic yet also eccentrically ordered world of childhood with startling vividness. In *Witch Week* (Macmillan Children's books, 1982, 210 pp.) we are shown the real underworld of the dynamics in a classroom through the eyes of several of the children in it. We see the complex web of group interaction, the wildly differing perceptions, the precise and sometimes cruel justice that children mete out to each other, and we also see, as the mystery unfolds, the slow emergence of friendships in this crazy yet logical jungle world of children.

Similarly, Jones has a talent for portraying the deep intricacies and nitty-gritty realities of domestic life. Most of her novels are firmly set within family situations of one sort or another (though there are exceptions) and portray the subtle dynamics of family interaction. Some of them, like *The Ogre Downstairs*, *The Time of the Ghost* and *Charmed Life*, are deeply concerned with sibling rivalry.

II

The children through whose eyes mysteries unfold are usually very bright, resourceful, and often startlingly eccentric or talented. Often they are unaware of their own resourcefulness or talents, and through events become gradually aware of them. They also come to see their own more unsavory characteristics as well; they learn to see how their actions and behaviour appear to others. Jones's novels are always

deeply concerned with the growth of self-knowledge in their child or adolescent characters, but also often in adult characters. In *The Ogre Upstairs* (Macmillan, London, 1974, 191 pp.), Jones's first novel, two families have been blended into a new step-family, and things are not going at all well. The two sets of children hate each other, and one set particularly despises their stepfather, whom they dub 'the Ogre'. Some chemistry sets the children are given turn out to be magical — alchemical, in fact — and through the snowballing zany events that follow, the two lots of children slowly come to understand each other.

It is only towards the end that the stepchildren of 'the Ogre' begin to see him as an ordinary human being with human frailties, one of which is intolerance of the chaos that living with children brings. Moreover, this new understanding only comes about after the sudden realization on the part of 'the Ogre' himself about what is really going on, and how the children feel about him. Unlike many writers of children's fantasy, Jones is able to represent adults who are able to accept and believe in magical phenomena and grow through them, just as the children do. What is really occurring in *The Ogre Downstairs* is the transformation of a difficult and chaotic family situation into one of greater maturity and acceptance; the chemistry sets themselves are agents of this change, this alchemical transformation.

Often what is discovered is the child's very identity. In *Cart and Cwidder*, for instance (Macmillan, London, 1975, 191 pp.), Moril discovers that his parents are very different people than the ones he had assumed them to be, and he must work out just what he is out of the very strange mix that resulted from his parents' union. In *Archer's Goon* (Methuen, 1984, 241 pp.), Howard discovers that his real identity is far more than that of a thirteen-year-old boy. (*Archer's Goon*, incidentally, is perhaps the closest of Jones's novels to science fiction.)

Jones's books are all, in one way or another, journeys into identity and self-discovery. All of her novels have a sense of an opening up, a dawning of light, a wonderful unfolding, as characters not only unravel the mysteries that Jones has cunningly planted from the beginning, but also mature into a greater understanding of their world and themselves.

Much great fantasy is, of course, concerned with this theme of self-discovery; one thinks immediately of C. S. Lewis, Ursula Le Guin, Patricia McKillop or Madeleine L'Engle. In fact, even the hackneyed quest of the Hero Who Finds Himself in much of modern mediocre fantasy writing has emerged from this tradition. And of course the self-discovery theme also has strong roots in mainstream writing, both for children and adults. In many ways, perhaps because of their rich realistic feel and their portrayal of complex interactions, many of Jones's novels seem as much in the tradition of the modern mainstream novel as that of the children's fantasy. The blend is original and intoxicating.

One of the ways Jones is able to achieve the sense of opening up is by making observations and comments from the perspective of a particular character. The implications of these comments can be seen only later by that character. The gentle irony and subtle shift of perspective involved in this process help to bring characters alive as real, interesting people with changing viewpoints. Such subtle irony and Jones's good-humoured acceptance of human frailties, prevents any possibility of her sounding moralistic or judgemental. Her characters simply grow in self-understanding and learn to evaluate their own behaviour more critically.

> I get angry when Uncle Kestrel tells me that we gave offence in Shelling! It is not very logical. . . . I remember, and I know that we all, even Gull, who is the most modest of us, felt and behaved as if we were special people. I think we are, now. But the fact is, I had no grounds to think it then. I had no business to set myself up. I am ashamed.
>
> (*The Spellcoats*, Macmillan, London, 1979, p. 169)

Or again:

> Christopher had no idea that people saw him like this. He was astounded. What's wrong with me? he thought. I'm nice really! When he went to the Anywheres as a small boy, everyone had liked him. Everybody had smiled. . . . Christopher saw that he had gone on thinking that people only had to see him to like him, and it was only too clear that nobody did. . . . He seemed to have hurt Flavian's feelings badly. He had not thought Flavian had feelings to hurt.
>
> (*The Lives of Christopher Chant*, Macmillan, London, 1988, p. 188)

III

So while Jones's perspective is not moralistic it is nevertheless deeply moral. We see this most clearly in her treatment of good and evil. In the complex flow of life that Jones presents, most of her characters, too, are a complex mixture of good and bad. Many of her child/adolescent characters are talented and special, yet are peppered with the same human failings as the rest of us have.

Some characters, like the enchanter Chrestomanci who appears in several novels (but most extensively in *Charmed Life* and *The Lives of Christopher Chant*), strike us as particularly, deeply good, with their goodwill, their humour and reasonableness and courtesy, while still coming across as real, fallible human beings.

But there are others, too, who strike us as undeniably and horribly evil. Evil, in Jones's universe, comes about through a particular approach to life and to other people: a desire for power for its own sake and an absence of ordinary human kindness. Nearly always, interestingly enough, there is also a lack of a genuine sense of humour. Such a character may appear ordinary, or even charming and attractive at first; his or her monstrousness is inner, and often hidden from public view.

Nearly all of these genuinely nasty characters are adults. The Duchess in *The Magicians of Caprona*, Uncle Ralph in *The Lives of Christopher Chant*, 'They' in *The Homeward Bounders*, the Lees in *A Tale of Time City*, Kankdredin in *The Spellcoats*, and Laurel and Mr Leroy in *Fire and Hemlock* are all despicable and wholly evil because of their callousness and their cynical self-graspingness. They are utterly unscrupulous; they use people and they are obsessed with power. One of the few child villains, Gwendolen in *Charmed Life* (Macmillan, London, 1977, 204 pages in the Puffin edition), is contemptible for exactly the same reasons, although she is treated with an irony and humour that make us laugh at her as well.

It is clear that, in the flux of life that Jones values for its own sake, what she values most is the single, precious individual with his or her unique qualities and eccentricities, and the mysterious force in each one

that leads to change and eventual maturity. Conversely, the person or force who debases these values is abhorrent. It is significant that the only characters who do not change in her novels — whose viewpoint, at least, hardly alters at all — are evil characters. They are evil precisely because they refuse to flow with the rest of life, to be vulnerable, the change and deepen, as all life does.

In a few cases, they do not even grow old or die; their lack of humane qualities is emphasized by this non-human trait. Monigan, in *The Time of the Ghost* (Macmillan, 1981, 192 pp.), is actually an ancient force who was once worshipped and sacrificed to in an area of the English countryside. Some children somehow awaken this ancient power and it tries to take one of them as a sacrifice. This figure is one of pure malevolence, having no ability to relate to anything except in terms of its own power and desire. In portraying this evil entity that is not human and is therefore unchanging by its very nature, Jones seems to want to stress those characteristics that make for lack of humanity; Monigan is representative of Jones's evil characters in this very unchangingness and coldness. (This probably explains why Jones's evil characters are rarely children: children are, by their very nature, in the process of growing and becoming.)

IV

Despite the delineation of some characters as essentially good and others as irredeemably evil, one does not gain a sense of a neat black-and-white view of life in Jones's universe. This is partly because, as we have seen, most of the characters are neither wholly good nor bad, but complex and richly layered. Also, characters' reactions to events are highly individual and complex, not stereotypical; and Jones often portrays characters' different perceptions of the same events.

Significant, too, is the fact that, while Jones's endings are usually very satisfying, rarely are they tidy black-and-white solutions. In *The Homeward Bounders* (Macmillan, 1981, 224 pp. in the Magnet paperback), although 'They' are finally beaten at their own game, the child protagonist is left, in the end, in quite a sad, difficult situation. It is not wholly a happy ending. *The Homeward Bounders* illustrates that Jones is not afraid to show children the painful side of life. Jamie's fate strikes one as unjustly hard, but it has meaning and substance through the fulfilment of Jamie's unique task in life. Life is complex, Jones is saying — messy and difficult and often sad — but there is an underlying sense of the rightness of things, of characters' lives being part of a larger pattern. Life is not without pattern or purpose.

Similarly, in *The Spellcoats* we are denied a totally happy ending as Jones leaves us with some tantalizingly loose ends, while in *Archer's Goon*, we are left with a glimpse (again tantalizing) of what the future of the characters might be — and the suggestion is that it will not be easy.

V

The use of mythological elements (as in *The Time of the Ghost*) is very common, in one way or another, in Jones's novels. In both *Eight Days of Luke* and *Dogsbody* she makes use of actual figures from various mythologies, incarnating them in our modern world; and sometimes she uses her own created mythological figures, such as Monigan (which may or may not be based on a true myth) or the Time Lady in *A Tale of Time City*.

In many cases, figures that are part of a particular world's mythology turn out to be real, living entities in that world, forces with true power. This does not in any way take away their imaginal power; in fact, by having mythological figures act out their fates again in the modern world or in the modern age of a given imaginary world, she emphasizes the real power of myth in our lives, and our need for it. The characters in *The Spellcoats* become mythological figures in the other two novels in the loose series set in the land of Dalemark, and the patterns that were set in that far-off prehistory of *The Spellcoats* become imprints on the fate of that land.

Here is a paradox in Jones' universe: life is unpredictable yet laced with pattern and meaning; characters are eccentrically unique yet often live out long-ago myths or fulfil some necessary, almost pre-ordained function. In this, it seems to me that Jones is simply reflecting the feelings we all experience of the paradoxical nature of our own lives.

Whether they are set in some exotic imaginary world or in our own mundane one, Jones's novels always beautifully marry a sense of the magical and wonderful with the gritty feel of the everyday world. Her portrayal of characters, of family life, of ordinary everyday objects, has the totally concrete, tactile feel of reality about it.

This is how Jones describes Howard's first sight of the 'Goon' in *Archer's Goon*:

> He was filling most of the rest of the kitchen with long legs and huge boots. It was a knack the Goon had. The Goon's head was very small, and his feet were enormous. Howard's eyes travelled up a yard or so of tight faded jeans, jerked to a stop for a second at the knife with which the Goon was cleaning the dirty nails of his vast hands, and then travelled on over an old leather jacket to the little, round fair head in the distance. The little face looked half-daft.
>
> (*Archer's Goon*, Methuen's Children's Books, 1984, pp. 1–2)

Jones can give us the atmosphere and physical feel of a place in two short sentences:

> They went into the small dark house. It had a sad, damp smell and a lot of clocks ticking.
>
> (*Archer's Goon*, p. 41)

In a similar way, in *The Time of the Ghost* we find a strikingly vivid and concrete portrayal of what it would be like to be a 'ghost' or disembodied presence.

As well as being inventive and wildly creative, the magic depicted in Jones's novels has a matter-of-fact, real quality about it. This is partly because beneath all the wild fun and exciting plot elements, interesting ideas bound about the world and the place of magic in it. All of the novels in which Chrestomanci appears, for example, contain the concept of the existence of many alternate worlds. Whole series of these worlds are so closely related that the only difference between them is some small detail, such as a particular historical event or the presence or absence of magic. Magic, in those worlds where it does exist, is simply another fact of life, so that witches, enchanters and magical phenomena are just as natural as ordinary things in our world. Sometimes accidents can occur in the way the worlds are related to each other, as in *Witch Week*, in which a historical accident has resulted in a world that is exactly like ours, except that witches are both extremely common and extremely illegal; and it becomes Chrestomanci's job to put

things right. Such concepts, although not in themselves wholly original, make the magic in Jones's books feel real and entirely possible, and make her novels conceptually interesting as well.

VI

A good example of the way Jones can weave mythology and a sense of ancient, abiding magical forces into the grainy feel of the everyday world is *Fire and Hemlock* (Greenwillow Books, 1984, 280 pp. in the Bantam edition).

In this novel Jones employs an English folk legend that appears in two medieval ballads, 'The Tale of Thomas the Rhymer' and 'Tam Lin'. In both of these tales, although with variations, a man is enchanted by a fairy woman and lives for seven years in 'Elfland' (fairyland). He is then allowed to return to the world for seven years, but after that, his fate is unclear. Jones transposes this myth to modern England, where a musician called Thomas Lynn seems to be bound in a very strange way to a very beautiful, mysterious woman he has recently divorced.

Jones opens the novel, as she often does, with a mystery: eighteen-year-old Polly becomes aware that there are whole chunks of her past that she seems to have forgotten; that, in fact, there is a whole series of events and people in her life that seems to remember now, but which someone has attempted to eradicate. With her, we go back and piece together the events of her childhood, from the time she first befriends Thomas Lynn and first glimpses the truth. Polly must save Tom from a dreadful fate.

The novel is awash with the small details of everyday living; Jones is covering many years in Polly's life, and the wonderful thing is that she manages to sustain our interest throughout. Sometimes places, people and times do become a little confusing. If there is any criticism at all to be made of Jones's novels, it is that her plots tend to be somewhat complicated, sometimes even convoluted. Side by side the events of mundane life are the evidences of ancient dark forces; Jones reinforces this by prefacing each chapter with a quote from either of the two ballads.

The fascinating thing about *Fire and Hemlock* — as with all of Jones' novels — is the way Jones manages to do so much more than tell a wonderfully engrossing tale (not a mean feat in itself, of course). *Fire and Hemlock* is a novel about the process of growing up. We see Polly's experiences through the eyes of both the child and then the older adolescent, and we follow her growing maturity.

The novel is also about relationship. We watch Polly coming to terms with her immature and selfish mother and her disappointing father; this is contrasted with the warm and deepening relationship between Polly and her grandmother, who turns out to be more than she appears at first. Significantly, it is here only really loving relative who turns out to hold a key to the mystery.

The book is also about the growth of a particular relationship that begins when Polly, as a child, first meets Thomas Lynn: the development of their friendship, the experience of separation and hurt, and finally a mature love that accepts imperfection and complexity. Polly comes to understand that pain and even betrayal are aspects of genuine love. Indeed, the resolution — and the salvation of Tom — depends on this insight.

Again, Jones gives us the very antithesis of growth and relationship in Laurel, the immortal 'fairy queen' figure who, beneath the surface beauty and elegance, is chilling in her cold logic, her ruthlessness, and her lack of any genuine warmth or human feeling. She is totally unable to relate; her only interest in the various men she has entrapped through the centuries is her practical use of them. She is unchanging and emotionless, a non-human, mythological force like Monigan, the opposite of all that is human, vulnerable and growing. Although she is evil she is also, in some sense, simply a fact of life, a principle that we humans cannot destroy, but must deal with as best we can. Here again we see that Jones's approach is far from simplistic, even on the subject of evil.

VII

Howl's Moving Castle (Greenwillow Books, 1986, 212 pp. in the Ace edition), like *Fire and Hemlock*, would suit adolescents and adults rather than younger children, but its tone is very different. Despite its undertones and splashes of humour, *Fire and Hemlock* is a rather serious book, but *Howl's Moving Castle* is a delightful and uproarious romp from start to finish. Here Jones is at her quirkiest and most outrageously witty.

In the land of Ingary, a nasty spell is laid on Sophie, who must seek the help of the apparently wicked Wizard Howl; the motives behind the spell and how to remove it, and the apparent contradictions in Howl's character and behaviour, are the mysteries we have to unravel. Along the way we meet an enchanted prince, a menacing scarecrow, a shrewd fire demon, even an ordinary household in the Wales of our world.

Through all this, and despite the big differences in tone and setting from those of *Fire and Hemlock*, many of the familiar Jones trademarks are here: the combining of the fantastical and magical with the mundane and ordinary, and the presence of vividly real characters who are much more than they seem at first, who develop and discover their talents and identities. Again, a main theme is the growth of relationship, in this case most strikingly between Howl and Sophie, but also between other characters as well. And again the evil in the novel is personified by characters who care nothing for individuals or relationship but seek only their own power. Once again, Jones manages to do this without over-simplification of characterization or stereotyping, while telling a wonderfully funny and engrossing tale as well.

Over a period of about two decades, Diana Wynne Jones has produced at least twenty books, all of which can be found to contain common and typical characteristics that embody her unique vision and style. That this can be so, and that, far from being written to any formula, each of her books is highly original different from all the others as well as immensely enjoyable, is Diana Wynne Jones's special genius.

— Roslyn K. Gross, August 1991

WYNNE WHITEFORD had his first sf story publication in the 1930s, and has written for a living throughout his life. However, most of us would know him for the stories he published in Carnell's English sf magazines (especially *New Worlds*) in the 1950s and 1960s, and a series of novels, published locally by Paul Collins, that began with *Breathing Space Only* in 1980. Wynne Whiteford's novels are now published by Ace Books in USA.

Sea, space, time: Chandler's voyages

by Wynne Whiteford

FROM SEA TO SHINING STAR
by A. Bertram Chandler
edited by Keith Curtis and Susan Chandler; illustrated by Nick Stathopoulos

Dreamstone; 1990; 345 pp.
0 9587968 0 7; A$100; 0 9587968 1 5; A$70

Available: Dreamstone, PO Box 312, Fyshwick, ACT 2609, Australia

The overall concept of this collection of the stories of 'Jack' Chandler, as he was known to his friends, suggests a gradually developing extrapolation from seafaring tales to the exploration of humanity's future in outer space. The cover by Nick Stathopoulos — a montage of a seascape with a tramp steamer in the foreground, a futuristic spaceship rising through clouds in the background, and the face of the author surveying the scene — seizes the theme admirably.

Nick Stathopoulos himself seems to be the only person to dislike the printed cover. At the Easter 1991 Brisbane convention, he displayed the original painting alongside copies of the book, pointing out that the intense blacks used in parts of the original were less emphatic on the cover. Comparing them, you have to agree with him, and the black-and-white frontispiece opposite the book's foreword complements the cover. Notice the way the black-and-white version captures the intent expression on Chandler's face.

The order in which the stories are presented reinforces the 'Sea to Shining Star' theme. However, a page at the end of the book gives the dates and places of first publication for each story. Reading the stories in the order in which they appeared shows that the author's interest in interstellar space flight goes back a very long way. Is it possible that his interest in the sea sprang from a lifelong compromise in which he regarded a seagoing vessel as a Clayton's spaceship?

I feel the most powerful and unforgettable story in the book is the last one, 'Giant Killer'. It is also the longest, a novelette of nearly 20,000 words. It gets straight into the story with the birth of the central character, Schrick, in a savage, confused, vital society that is only gradually revealed to us as not quite human. These 'people' live in perpetual fear of another face they call the Giants.

By degrees, we realize that their world is a spaceship. The Tribe, referring to themselves as 'the People', are actually rats living in the insulating material of the spaceship's hull, mutated by the radiation they receive from Outside. The Giants, of which there are only five, are the human crew of the ship.

The extraordinary variations in the People enable their violent society to evolve rapidly. Somehow the writer has penetrated the psyche of mutating rats, with their callousness and hair-trigger fury driven by fear, and with the early stirrings of developing conscience and altruism occasionally tingeing their rage.

But I won't take you any farther into the story. Let Jack Chandler do that with his inimtable, vigorous *élan*.

Although 'Giant Killer' brings the book to a climax, it was the earliest of the stories to appear — as far

back as October 1945, in *Astounding Science Fiction*. In spite of the intervening forty-six years, it does not date, except perhaps in very minor details of the spaceship. Chandler was only thirty-three when he wrote it, eleven years before he first settled in Australia. He was born at Aldershot, in southern England, in 1912.

Chronologically, the second story in the book, 'Castaway', which appeared in *Weird Tales*, November 1947, is an offbeat story involving time travel. A tramp steamer, such as one in which Chandler perhaps had sailed, comes near an apparently uninhabited island. The narrator is shipwrecked, swims with great trauma to the shore, sees footprints, follows them. In the jungle in the interior of the island he finds a spaceship (based on a V2 rocket, like most spaceships in the fiction of 1947). Exploring its deserted cabin, he finds a log identifying it as the interstellar ship *Centaurus*. The spaceship wreck is from the future. The castaway finds a device that apparently enables the ship to travel in time, but an experimental touch of START and STOP buttons makes him feel so odd that he rushes out of the ship and back to the beach. A ship (marine type) is approaching. In horror, he realizes that it is his own ship, as it had been before the shipwreck. . . .

Whether he is dealing with deep space or the sea, Chandler tells a gripping story. There are thirty of them here, including two, 'Hindslight' and 'Man Alone', written around 1959 or 1960, never before published, giving the reader a total of nearly 200,000 words.

A list of Chandler's published books shows an impressive total of forty-one, published in the USA, England and Australia, with many of them translated into Japanese, Russian, Swedish and Hungarian. They span a period of twenty-three years, with an especially prolific period in the 1960s — three books published in 1963, four in 1964, three more in 1965, and four — the 'Rim Worlds' volumes — in 1967. But his most startling output was in the year 1971, when no less than five novels appeared, with three more the following year.

I've already mentioned that the seagoing ship for Chandler could have been a Clayton's spaceship — the spaceship you're having when you're not having a spaceship. Perhaps this principle applies fairly generally to sf writers. It's been pointed out that most fictional spaceships are evolved from either aircraft or marine craft, depending on the experience of the writer in either field. It's also been noted that many of the writers of the 'Golden Age' generation used engineering knowledge in their books.

But did engineering, marine or aircraft experience really lead writers into producing sf? Or are we looking at this from the wrong end of the telescope?

Most writers whose formative years came in the 1930s or 1940s began by looking forward to a brilliant future world — the worlds of the film *Just Imagine* (1930) or the background world (not the plot) of Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* somewhat earlier. Any horror stories involving death rays or atomic explosions were set 500 or a 1000 years in the future. We never expected the laser or the nuclear bomb to come upon us in one stride. The future world, as in Ray Bradbuury's *The Illustrated Man*, beckoned attractively.

Most of its problems, we though, would be solved by mechanical and electrical engineering. *That*, perhaps, was the motivation drawing us into fields of activity that seemed to offer a short cut to utopia.

Later, of course, we realized that a universally agreed-upon utopia could never exist. One person's utopia is another person's fiasco.

The great thing about A. Bertram Chandler's work is his unquenchable optimism. Some day, he felt, humanity would explore far across the galaxy, even though many details remain to be filled in along the way. And in the long run, that kind of cool optimism seems to pay off. Pessimism is a quick, easy attention-getter, but it looks ridiculous in hindsight as life marches onward and upward. Remember the predictions of the Club of Rome, or the dire warnings of the Pyramidologists (not the Geelong branch) that the world would end in 1952!

I still find it hard to accept faster-than-light travel, as Chandler did with his 'Mannschen Drive', but I still think we will some day make it to the stars, even if we must use some kind of cryogenic suspended animation. I don't think the Rim Worlds of our galaxy will be settled in the way he envisions.

On the other hand, I accept that his guess is as good as mine. The exciting thing is that none of us really knows.

— Wynne Whiteford, May 1991

Dave Langford: 'Critical Mass' and 'Critical Hits' were regular pages of brief reviews which I wrote for the British games magazines *White Dwarf* and *GM* respectively. In past issues Bruce has outstripped reality by publishing selections from all eighteen *GM* columns even though the magazine foundered after publishing seventeen. Following a very brief interregnum, the strangely similar magazine *GMI* (*GamesMaster International*) rose from the ashes of *GM* and ran a rewritten eighteenth column, from which I cull the new bits not already seen here. What follows will be, if Bruce's patience holds out, his choice from the first nine *GMI* columns. The title reverted to my original 'Critical Mass' for no very good reason. (February 1991)

CRITICAL MASS
by Dave Langford

Critical Mass 1: The new bits

Recently I overcame my trilogy-phobia enough to read through Octavia Butler's 'Xenogenesis' SF trio: *Dawn*, *Adulthood Rites* and *Imago*, all now out in paperback (VGSF, 264 pp., £3.99). In this understated SF horror story, aliens bail out humanity after our nuclear war, but at a high price: their driving urge is to trade genetic material, and future generations on Earth will therefore be human/alien hybrids. 'We must love one another or die.'

The first book paints the big picture; the second shows the growing-up of a sympathetic hybrid in the reconstructed world; the third introduces a few complications which weren't really necessary but fill out the trilogy. This is good, restrained SF, which never overstresses its points but leaves you pondering on the attractions and nastiness of Butler's utopia. In the new regime, the last human couples can have wonderful sex via a tentacled alien intermediary . . . but are biologically compelled to shun one another's touch. (A sneaky dig at religious notions about physical love after Judgement Day?)

But the more I think about it, the more profoundly immoral and rape-like the aliens' approach seems. 'We've saved you from extinction and that gives us the right to have you bear *our* children alone.' On the face of it Butler seems icily neutral on the issue, but her choice of viewpoints does tend to imply a tacit endorsement of the visitors' actions.

Another new arrival from the Games Workshop 'Warhammer' stable *Zaragoz* (GW, 245 pp., £4.99) by Brian 'Craig' (Stableford), a fantasy that once again belies the Warhammer ambience by being solidly literate — though, dare I say it, not desperately compelling or original, and lacking the quirkiness of Jack Yeovil's contribution (see *SFC* 69/70). Train-journey fodder. My award for the Book I Would Least Like To Be Seen Reading On A Train goes to Craig's *Plague Daemon* (GW, 235 pp., £4.99), with the least appealing cover of even this uninviting lot. No, I haven't yet read it: I'm awaiting delivery of the ten-foot pole with which I plan not to touch the jacket.

Critical Mass 2: Jug jug jug jug jug

Faced with a five-hour train journey to what turned out to be the most dismal SF event I've ever attended (details omitted to protect the innocent — me — from the lawyers of the guilty), I bravely selected the fattest blockbuster from the pile. The title alone is about as portentous as you can get: *Earth* by David Brin (Macdonald, 601 pp., £13.95).

Fifty years hence, lots of today's gloomier predictions have been fulfilled: solar ultraviolet is burning through the depleted ozone layer, many more species are extinct, the weather pattern is a mess, etc. There are compensations. This future is as full of mixed blessings as the present, and has the right sort of convincing quirkiness — there's a mad logic in the idea of a bloody war for information freedom, waged against Switzerland and its secret numbered accounts. Meanwhile, within Earth's core, an orbiting singularity is gobbling mass, and the planet could cease to exist in perhaps two years. . . .

This makes for an exciting read. The imaginary physics is particularly good fun — would you believe gravity lasers? — yet it's another mixed blessing. We're promised an 'epic that transcends every genre in its scope and importance', but this ambition doesn't really come off, precisely because the pseudo-science (which in effect can do anything the author wants) overshadows the extrapolations of real, intractable problems.

Brin is an optimist and I like him for it, but in order to keep smiling (and avoid some depressingly plausible future, as in George Turner's *The Sea and Summer*) he's forced to pull this technological wild card from his sleeve and lose in serious impact what he gains in entertainment value. It all gets a bit much, especially when piled on the secondary and more interesting improbability of the 'Gaia' or living-Earth hypothesis achieving literal truth through information technology. Recommended, all the same.

(One little joke on readers who turn first to the back page and check there's a happy ending: *Earth* finishes with a separate short story. The joke backfires because this story's finale is an SF cliché of stupefying off-puttingness. . . .)

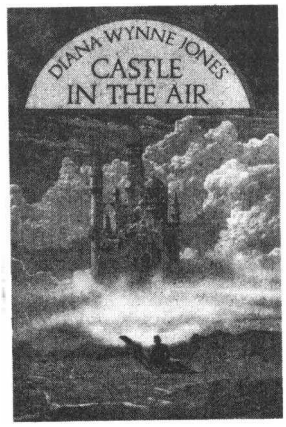
My new-magazine resolution, besides tackling the occasional blockbuster, is to tackle some new author each month. James Patrick Kelly's *Look into the Sun* (Mandarin, 280 pp., £3.99) is a good, unpretentious SF novel with a rich individual flavour. The technoglitter is kept in its place, as a backdrop to the people: when

the architect hero's new wonder of the world is unveiled, it's seen through a haze of personal problems, and his free ride on an alien ship to create the wonder of another world is dominated by what's done to him so he can survive there, and, indeed, eventually enjoy kinky sex there. Perhaps the aliens are slightly shallow, but Kelly avoids the soft option of making them tiresomely enigmatic ('You know not our ways, Earthman,' etc.), and after hinting at vast Secrets of the Universe is wise enough not to reveal them.

The short stories in Bruce 'Postmodern' Sterling's *Crystal Express* (Legend, 317 pp., £12.99) are less freaked and far-out than you'd expect from the one-time major prophet of cyberpunk. A good example is 'Swarm', which sprays a new coat of glitter on the traditional SF device of taking some cherished assumption (here, that intelligence has ultimate survival value) and saying, 'Oh yeah?' An adapted genetic superman, bristling with smartness and built-in weaponry, moves in to exploit dumb alien hive-creatures. Too late he learns that the Swarm has merely discarded intelligence as being, like tactical nuclear weaponry, too dangerous a tool to keep around. . . .

Philip K. Dick's *Beyond Lies the Wub* (Grafton, 510 pp., £5.99) is the first of five books collecting all his short fiction, emerging at last in paperback with his own afterwords. These twenty-five early works are surprisingly good value, but Dick's patented derangement really begins to flower in the twenty-seven stories of book two, *Second Variety* (ditto, 493 pp.). Few 'important' SF volumes are such readable fun.

Castle in the Air (Methuen, 208 pp., £8.95) is Diana Wynne Jones's sequel to the very funny *Howl's Moving Castle*. If there were rules for children's



(or rather, all-ages) fantasy, this author would constantly be breaking them all: she seems to babble artlessly and hilariously along, carried away by the flood of her own invention, until suddenly every last plot thread is gathered and tied in a double reverse Gordian knot. This story is slightly swamped by the inrush of characters from *Howl* when the sequel connection emerges near the end, but still scores highly for anarchic misuse of Arabian Nights props: djinns, bottled genies, magic carpets, bazaars, polygamy, the lot.

To show Diana Wynne Jones in different vein, Mandarin have reissued three more (all £2.99). Her complex and allusive *Fire and Hemlock* points up the arbitrary nastiness of faerie ways by echoing the tales of Tam Lin and Thomas the Rhymer in modern dress (it helps if you know the ballads). *The Homeward Bounders* is another powerful one with the humour slightly subdued: it pictures the world and indeed the multiverse as a gameboard where unfortunates who get caught in the wrong hex can become 'discards', like the Flying Dutchman, the Wandering Jew, and our hero. *Hidden Turnings*, edited by Jones, is a collection of original SF/fantasy which will doubtless sell a million thanks to Terry Pratchett's story of a VERY SINISTER DISCO DANCER, but has much other good stuff.

Also reissued in heaping handfuls is Stanislaw Lem, Poland's Mr Science Fiction and self-confessed Master of Intellect (all Mandarin, £4.99). *Tales of Pirx the Pilot* is a wildly uneven collection of clanking, nuts-and-bolts space stories, half of them good. *The Chain of Chance*, a fiendish near-future whodunnit or whatdunnit about seemingly pointless but weirdly linked deaths, has a horrifyingly plausible solution — an unliving serial killer so convincing that you begin to suspect that random, inexplicable deaths must already be happening for closely similar reasons. And *His Master's Voice* shows Lem the intellectual at full stretch, confronting scientists with an intricate message from space which can be decoded and used to create marvels never before seen on Earth, but which still doesn't make sense. Some of the speculations here will make your brain squirt in twin streams from both ears.

Fred Saberhagen presides over *Berserker Base* (VGSF, 316 pp., £3.99), billed as a collaborative novel but really a collection of shorts by six other authors, bodged together in an incredibly clunky narrative framework by Saberhagen himself. His berserkers, spacegoing robot enemies of all life, have become an SF myth which is somehow better than any of the actual stories about them. . . . Of the contributors, Stephen Donaldson is quite surprisingly bad, Connie Willis scores for writing the first funny story in this saga — and Poul Anderson, Larry Niven and Roger Zelazny all develop the idea, long and carefully avoided by Saberhagen, that it would nice to have a few implacable killer machines on *our* side. It passes the time.

The obligatory graphic novel mention should be of Alan Moore's and David Lloyd's *V for Vendetta* (Titan, £9.95), an early, very odd combination of extravagant and often powerful effects with questionable logic — rather like a sombre version of the old TV *Avengers*, set in a blackly dystopian 1997–8.

I had more graphic fantasy fun with *The Waste Land* (Harper & Row US import), cartoonist Martin Rowson's weirdly brilliant pastiche of the T. S. Eliot poem seen as a private-eye movie. The Holy Grail, for example, equals the Maltese Falcon. This makes no sense at all unless you remember a bit about both Eliot and classic films like *The Big Sleep*. . . . It's said that Penguin's forthcoming edition will be severely edited after legal complaints from the Eliot estate

(ironic, considering how Eliot himself used to swipe material from all over the place). Grab the import while you can.

(Later note: the Penguin edition was indeed hacked around. 'You can't use Phlebas the Phoenician,' insisted the Eliot estate, so Rowson had to fall back on a character called Mike the Minoan. Likewise, a row of vessels seen in the British museum had to be labelled 'vase', 'amphora' and so on, because the lawyers refused to permit the original 'Jug jug jug jug jug'. . . .)

Critical Mass 3: Words words fail fail me me

I write this at the height of our heatwave. In my office, word processors are melting and keyboards dripping sluggishly groundwards. I've lugged a computer down to the cellar of our collapsing Victorian home in order to type this in dank coolness . . . but woodlice keep creeping into the works. Any obscenities or mentions of Piers Anthony should be ascribed to insect infestation of my disk drives. You have been warned.

Lyonesse III: Madouc (Grafton, 358 pp., £12.95) is the third book of a leisurely pre-Arthurian fantasy sequence which shows Jack Vance's strengths and weaknesses in high relief. He can do you a nicely exotic landscape; his pictures of magical doings are fascinating and menacing; his whimsical names are lovely (e.g. a fairy retreat called Thripsey Shee); and in close-up scenes, the politely ironic dialogue is always a treat. Vance does less well on the wide screen: his picaresque approach is geared to jewelled incidents and elegant chat, not the epic sweep of war.

Thus the world-shaking battles here fall pretty flat, with even the prose losing its usual fizz. Vance's descriptions of food are more heartfelt; here's a man who dreams not of glory but of seven-course oyster breakfasts. The changeling Princess Madouc's rebellion against stuffy court tradition and search for her parents are enjoyable — but in the best Vance plots (*The Blue World, Emphyrio, The Anome*) the rebellious youth goes on to change the world, and Madouc never has the power or opportunity for that.

Every page of *Madouc* is smoothly readable, but in the end there are too many words to be sustained by the limp plot. You finish it feeling not so much replete as vaguely tired.

Sequels and series and trilogies . . . the saga continues. Fay Sampson's *Black Smith's Telling* (Headline, 275 pp., £3.50) offers another dose of her alternative Arthuriad. Familiar characters come to new and sinister life when seen from half-sister Morgan's side. There are no swords in stones, but Modred is duly born. This one is told by a smith who's a warlock of the Old Religion; as the magical rites described consist chiefly of having it off at Sabbat orgies, I was never quite convinced that this easily suborned chap actually wielded all the power Morgan was supposed to be coveting. Nice one, though.

A non-review: *Hyperion* by Dan Simmons (Headline, 346 pp., £13.95) has been hugely praised, but it's only half of a fat SF novel. To avoid terminal dissatisfaction, I'm told, you must read straight on to the resolution in part two, *The Fall of Hyperion* — a work not even hinted at in this edition. Naughty, naughty. I'll review the complete story when Headline sends the rest.

Tales from the Saragossa Manuscript by Jan Potocki (Dedalus European Classics, 159 pp., £5.99) is also incomplete, but for good reason. There's actually a sequel to this 1814 oddity, but one that resolves nothing, as explained in the learned introduction by fantasy knowledge master Brian Stableford. These suave, witty *Tales* of probable ghosts and possible demons suggest a dream-labyrinth from which the narrator might never escape. Going to sleep in carnal bliss usually leads to a nasty awakening amid decayed corpses under a gallows. Could this have been one inspiration for the entanglements of Robert Irwin's *The Arabian Nightmare*?

A jaded reader recently said my reviews had become repetitious. It's a fair cop, guv. Er, of course this reflects the repetitiousness of the blasted books. The repetitiousness of the books. Of the books. Such as Piers Piers Anthony Anthony's truly dreadful *For Love of Evil* (Grafton Grafton, 318 pp., £3.99), in which he not only soggily rehashes the entire threadbare sequence of tawdry plots comprising four previous 'Incarnations of Immortality' books (five, actually; the first is readable), but congratulates himself in an afterword on how cleverly he's regurgitated his own appalling drivel. Words words fail fail me me.

I'm always interested in weird stuff on the outskirts of science. (Plug: *The Skeptical Inquirer*, the famous US mag which lambasts paranormal loonies, now has a promising British counterpart in *The Skeptic* — details from PO Box 475, Manchester, M60 2TH.) Those wonderfully eclectic people of the *Whole Earth Catalog* have published a compendium of strangeness in *The Fringes of Reason* (Harmony Books, 224 pp., $14.95).

It's all here. The jacket lists 'channelling, psychic powers, crystals, Bigfoot, shamanism, UFOs, perpetual motion, conspiracies, cults, flat Earth, reincarnation, spontaneous human combustion, dowsing, prophecy, weird phenomena, astral projection, brain machines, living dinosaurs, hollow Earth, Atlantis, alien abductions' . . . and there's more, much more, calculated to make both True Believers and Nasty Rationalist Scientists froth at every orifice.

The great thing about Whole Earth publications is that they don't merely summarize but give addresses and steer you to source material, be it never so daft. Read how to get *Flat Earth News* ('NO PROOF OF ANY KIND EXISTS TODAY 1988 for a Greese [sic] Ball whirling in space!'), join the Church of the SubGenius (the ultimate cult, a hilarious spoof . . . *or is it?*), or even 'Learn to project your astral body *while driving!!*'. There's good coverage of sceptical counterattacks, too.

Besides being a book to pillage for oddball inspirations, it's enormous fun to read. Incredibly, I actually bought this — by sending credit card details to Fringes, Whole Earth Catalog, 27 Gate Five Road, Sausalito, CA 94965, USA.

In Dougal Dixon's *Man After Man: an Anthropology of the Future* (Blandford, 128 pp., £14.95), the author of *Life After Man* turns his warped imagination from the 'lower orders' to what *Homo sap.*, the lords of creation, might become in a few million years. With illustrations. It's uneasy stuff: natural selection is OK for voles but is not supposed to happen to people like you and me. Certain premises are debatable; still, this is good nightmare material. Editor Wayne insists that several appalling examples of speculative human evo-

lution look just like famous games person Marcus L. Rowland, but perhaps he's being a little unfair. See for yourself.

Critical Mass 4: Seven languages at once

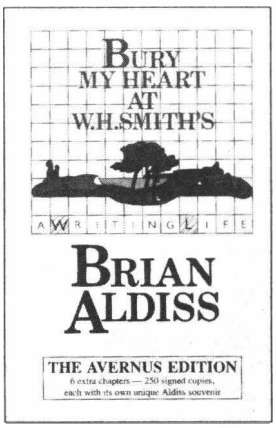
If there's anything more brain-numbing than several hundred SF fans at a British convention, it's several thousand of them at the annual world event. I'm writing in the groan-laden aftermath of ConFiction, the 48th World SF Convention and the first in the Netherlands.

This was hugely enjoyable despite shambolic programming. The 'Worldcon' once resembled baseball's 'World Series', in that 'World' is a delicate euphemism for 'USA'. Now, with the Iron Curtain in tatters, it's gone cosmopolitan — pulling the crowds from Eastern Europe and further-flung places. At the all-night parties, you could hear seven languages at once.

Loneliest moment of ConFiction: Brian Stableford realizing that every other member of a 'hard SF' panel had defected, leaving him all alone (until his wife hauled in an unwilling Langford). Most mysterious: the 'Pissed Fly' panel, whose members (including Bob Shaw) never found what the title meant — the organizer who knew the secret went missing. Best bit for me: winning the only Hugo Award which didn't go to the USA, and being congratulated by vast USSR fans glowing with *glasnost* and Heineken. Rather than fill my space with Hugos, I've passed the winners to *GM*'s news pages.

Coming Worldcons will be Chicago 1991, Florida 1992 and San Francisco 1993. The last venue was voted in Holland, beating the Hawaii counterbid which filled ConFiction with eldritch shirts and helium-filled parrots . . . all very surreal. Glasgow is bidding for 1995, but so is Australia and only time will tell.

One nice thing about these jamborees is the free booze from the book industry. During ConFiction, the SF Writers of America hospitality room was sponsored by many publishers, including Gollancz and Games Workshop. In London just beforehand, Grafton threw a birthday party for 70-year-old (and much bulkier than his publicity pictures) Ray Bradbury — launching his new book *A Graveyard for Lunatics*. After the Worldcon, Orbit Books organized a bash in the incredibly non-air-conditioned crypt of St Martin-in-the-Fields . . . a DIY sauna. All this helped me research the many brands of paracetamol which I'll be reviewing soon.



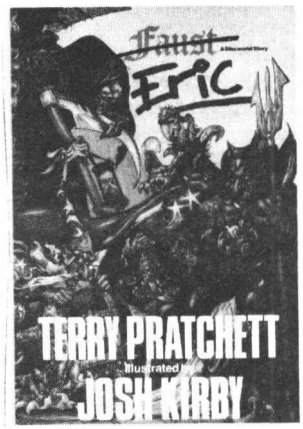
Which reminds me of Brian Aldiss's umpteenth official birthday party of 1990 (he's 65) thrown by his wife Margaret in what seemed the poshest hotel in Holland. This makes it hard to be nasty to *Bury My Heart at W. H. Smith's* (Hodder, 221 pp., £13.95), a gentle autobiography that gives the effect of sitting in a bar listening to ebullient Aldiss anecdotes — though not, alas, the *really* scurrilous ones. It's been nastily and unfairly reviewed by newspaper critics who seem incensed by his taking pride in a lifetime of writing SF. Few British authors in any field have as much to be proud of.

Greg Bear made it to ConFiction from distant Seattle, neatly in time for the British publication of *Queen of Angels* (Gollancz, 385 pp., £14.95). This new Bear blockbuster is more thoughtful and, I think, successful than the recent *Eternity*. Instead of gigantic, impossible technologies, he concentrates on a rigorously plausible Los Angeles of 2047 . . . 'The City of Our Lady the Queen of the Angels', as its full name translates.

Nanotechnology now allows expensive designer bodies and a believable approximation to psychiatric telepathy. The new vigilantes sentence their victims to computer-induced emotional torments which can burn you out in minutes. Artificial intelligences, sexless and abstract as angels, fumble hopelessly towards their programmed goal of self-awareness, with the breakthrough coming from the cruellest and least expected angle. Messages crawl back from the robot probe out at Centauri. The heroine, another angel of a sort, is conducting a hopeless multiple-murder investigation. . . .

Angels is a book full of doomed hopes which, by serendipity, lead to new breakthroughs and tiny victories. Unfortunately it's rather hard to get into, thanks to dense exposition and determined futurespeak (internal monologues of 2047 are desperately short on commas, and several items of slang take too long to make sense). It's so easy to slip across that fine line between hiding information in the narrative context and hiding it too well. But here there are many rewards. Nice one, Greg.

Eric (Gollancz, 126 pp, £7.99) is not so much another Discworld novel as a brief Terry Pratchett romp — a Faustian travelogue which gives his regular cover artist Josh Kirby a chance to run very slowly amok. I've liked Kirby's SF covers for more years than I (or probably he) would



care to admit: twisted, organic shapes and strange lines of force, adorning long-forgotten book imprints like Four Square. Here are fourteen large-format, double-page pictures in his sumptuous Discworld style (sixteen, counting title page and cover). Here in their perverse Pratchett incarnations are Death, Inca sacrifice, Odysseus, Helen of Troy, Creation, Hell, the wizard Rincewind, and the dread Luggage. The mixture as before, with exuberant visual aids.

Langford's Maxim for 1990 has been:

'In an increasingly science-fictional world, sanity can be preserved only by reading the odd non-SF book.' If you're worried about fundamentalism, the Rushdie affair and the idea of getting prosecuted for rudeness about God, Allah or L. Ron Hubbard, read *Blasphemy Ancient and Modern* by Nicolas Walter (Rationalist Press Association, 96 pp., £3.95).

This offers a racy historical overview of past persecutions for heresy, blasphemy and profanity (the Spanish Inquisition was still offing people last century and wasn't actually abolished until 1834), and examines the chaos of British law today. What's worse than merely having an absurd and divisive blasphemy law is enforcing it unequally. Technical blasphemies crowd the history of SF, fantasy and literature at large. If the law were uniformly applied, we'd plunge into a State control of literature more rigid than South Africa's. Instead, blasphemies that don't annoy Mary Whitehouse go unscathed but *Gay News* is prosecuted.

Walter presents the case for repealment and reminds us of many unsung heroes of free thought. One chap last century was jugged for plunging a courtroom into uproar with appalling obscenities and indeed blasphemies quoted from murky corners of . . . the Bible. Fundamentalists who believe the literal truth of its every word are surprisingly good at skipping awkward pages.

OK, you can stop skipping now. . . .

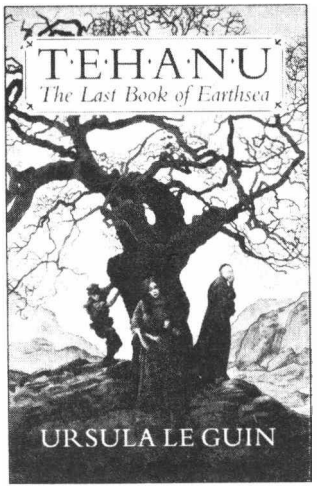
Critical Mass 5: Good cheer and successful sequels

The world of publishing is a constant source of surprises, most of them roughly akin to having a masked psychopath erupt into your bathroom with a whirring chainsaw; once in a while, though, something pleasant happens. I wouldn't dream of plugging my 1988 parody collection *The Dragonhiker's Guide to Battlefield Covenant at Dune's Edge: Odyssey Two* (Drunken Dragon Press), but can't resist revealing that its Spanish edition just arrived and is called . . . *Guia del Dragonstopista Galactico al Campo de Batalla Estelar de Covenant en el Limite de Dune: Odisea Dos.* Scribble that one in the phrasebook before your next trip to Benidorm.

A much more typical surprise was receiving an unexpected copy of my UFO spoof book, plus a gloomy rejection note, from a publisher who'd been sitting on it for more than *five years* and had better remain nameless (seven letters, starts with G). What a whirlwind, go-ahead industry.

Further personal good cheer comes from two absolutely spiffy anthologies which I nervously can't bring myself to review, or even as yet read all the way through, because I'm in them: *More Tales from the Forbidden Planet* edited by Roz Kaveney (Titan, large illustrated paperback, 268 pp., £7.95), and *Digital Dreams* edited by David V. Barrett (NEL, 347 pp.). Buy them, buy them.

The Kaveney anthology is nicely packaged, with a cover by Moebius and all fifteen authors and artists given fair and equal billing on the back. The Barrett collection is good value (twenty new stories by Brits about computers), but comparatively irritating for contributors: only six 'famous' ones are credited on the back, and only Terry Pratchett on the front, to Terry's own vast displeasure. . . .



Can you go back to a world whose story seems rounded and finished? Terrible disappointments may follow when authors return to add another sequel, especially after some time: Asimov, Heinlein, Niven, Pohl, even Wolfe, all failed to recapture the original spark. I was therefore nervous about Ursula Le Guin's *Tehanu: the Last Book of Earthsea* (Gollancz, 219 pp., £9.95). I needn't have been.

The story follows the now middle-aged Tenar (once Arha) from *The Tombs of Atuan*, and continues beyond the deeps of *The Farthest Shore*. There's relatively little action, little magic: this book works in the areas left unlit by the trilogy, such as how magicians and kings look to subsistence farmers at the bottom of the heap, and why women seem excluded from high magic. ('Weak/wicked as women's magic,' people say.) Le Guin weaves some rich explanatory images, and cannily puts many of them into the mouth of an unreliably articulate witch-aunt: there are no straight answers to the biggest questions, only parables.

When, in the end, some magical action does happen, it's shockingly different from the previous books' tales of great deeds seen from a mage's viewpoint. The day is saved by a sort of *deus ex machina* (prefigured earlier) which also suggests a final, burning metaphor about women and men and the sources of power.

Deceptively simple, quiet and passive, *Tehanu* leaves Earthsea richer and darker than before. 'There is no safety. There is no end. The word must be heard in silence. There must be darkness to see the stars. . . .'

Bob Shaw also more or less pulls it off in *Orbitsville Judgement* (Gollancz, hardback, 281 pp., £13.95), rounding up this sequence to a trilogy. Orbitsville, a vast hollow habitat with some 650 million times the living space of boring old Earth, was discovered in Book One and threatened to soak up human expansion forever. At the climax of Book Two it vanished from the universe, perhaps carrying its innumerable settlers to colonize another. Book three tells us where it went.

Any attempt to outdo Book Two would, I feared, result in a story so sprawling and cosmic as to lose interest for ordinary mortals. To avoid this, Shaw hooks you with human drama. Cruelly and humiliatingly fleeced by religious fanatics, the hero turns from a pleasant wimp (with Billy Liar tendencies) into a nastily driven instrument of revenge . . . which traps him into following the cult. What the fanatics want is transport to get off Orbitsville, which to their leader is clearly a Manichaean trap laid by the devil. He is, in a way, right.

Everybody, in fact, is both right and wrong. The major trap is a benevolent but (we learn) misguided alien attempt at ecological conservation — involving, for starters, twin universes and a timespan of forty billion years. The attempted escape

proves less wise than staying trapped. After meeting something far bigger than Orbitsville, the saner religious folk are confirmed in their beliefs, and the atheist hero in his. And finally, every thread is tied up more neatly than you'd believe possible.

What drags you along and counterpoints the large-scale action is the painful sight of the hero dehumanizing himself and heading for a sort of secular damnation. It's people and not big numbers that make widescreen SF work. That said, I remain unhappy that the sunny but disturbing finale of the original *Orbitsville* is invalidated by these sequels. It's a hell of a thing when the best ending in your trilogy is in volume one.

Dedalus, my favourite small publishers, continues to unearth eccentric classics, or at any rate old books. Is there anyone alive today who could contemplate reading the endless tiny print of Eugene Sue's monumental *The Wandering Jew* (847 pp., £9.99)? Evidently Brian Stableford could, since he provides a meaty introduction — not included in that page count! — explaining that it was serialized in French newspapers from 1844–5, contains 'the most spectacular example of an aborted climax in the entire history of popular fiction' (it was too popular to be let finish), and runs to over 500,000 words. Rather him than me.

(Later note: the long sentence in that paragraph was too much for the subeditors, who broke it into tiny little pieces and left me saying, quite unambiguously, that the *introduction* was half a million words long. No, no, Brian wouldn't waste two whole weeks on such ill-paid work. . . .)

Here too is the somewhat more classic *The Phantom of the Opera* by Gaston Leroux (1910, 385 pp., £6.99), issued in competition with a hardback now clogging the remainder shops — 'I *told* them not to do it,' confided Mr Stableford. And also, in the new series 'Decadence from Dedalus', Octave Mirbeau's *The Torture Garden* (1898, 284 pp., £6.99) is about what its title says, has some actual literary distinction, and should by no means be read before, during or after meals. Not nice at all.

More when my tummy settles down. . . .

Critical Mass 6: Horror . . . and the Ultimate Evil

As I write, Hallowe'en approaches and a terrible, surging, loathsome spawn of the damned is erupting from nightmarish sewers and tombs all around. . . . In other words, a lot of timely horror-related books are coming out.

Perhaps the oddest is the nonfiction *Fear Itself: The Horror Fiction of Stephen King (1976–1982)* (Pan, 255 pp., £4.99). Without personally being much of a horror buff, I can see that King is a masterly technician who deserves most of his success. The mixed essays in *Fear Itself* shower obligatory praise on him; canny old Fritz Leiber provides needed astringency by hurling buckets of ordure all over Stanley Kubrick's adaptation of *The Shining*.

Beneath the surface of this book lies a story of real-life dread and humiliation — of three horror fans whose co-authored King bibliography is (like everything else here) reprinted untouched from the 1982 US edition, along with a contact address so that millions of people can write and inform them about careless omissions like every single King novel and story for the last eight years.

Surely Pan should have updated this list, or at least done a minute's scissors-and-paste work to spare its compilers the incredible embarrassment of saying in print, in 1990, after thanking King for his extensive information and help: 'It has been stated that Richard Bachman is a pseudonym of Stephen King. This is not the case. . . . Stephen King has never used this name as a pseudonym.' Poor sods, standing there with faces covered in egg.

Here's another King celebration (what is this, his centenary?) with an exhaustive and exhausting bibliography right up to 1990: *The Stephen King Companion* edited by George Beahm (Macdonald, 365 pp., £13.95). Far less dignified and 'literary' than the 1982 collection, this is largely a book of trivia: blurbs and synopses, reviews and interviews, fan club data, fan mail, and so on down to utter barrel-scrapings . . . self-promotion from the blacksmith who made wrought iron bats for King's house, a potted biography of some book dealer, an inane 'Rating Yourself As A King Fan' quiz, etc.

More substantial pieces include the bibliography, *Playboy*'s King interview, and Harlan Ellison gleefully hurling buckets of ordure over just about every movie version of a King novel. This apart, the tone is pretty adulatory. King's great virtues could stand up to some criticism which goes beyond calling an occasional minor story 'lightweight'.

I personally reckon, for example, that *The Stand* is far too long, that its biological-Armageddon plot and its post-holocaust fantasy quest belong in separate books, and that the climax plunges into ludicrous bathos with the idea of God *nuking* the forces of evil. Reissuing it in a version 75,000 words longer seems a deeply weird notion. But the *Companion* retorts that *The Stand* is the fans' number-one favourite (which is an eye-opener), and manages in the same section to imply a comparison of King with Mozart (which is dribble).

SF fans are likely to approach the new Arthur C. Clarke novel warily, feeling that too many of his books have for too long been needless sequels, wonky collaborations, strained attempts at Even Huger Concepts . . . or all three at once. In fact *The Ghost from the Grand Banks* (Gollancz, 249 pp., £12.95) is a lively, enjoyable performance, crammed with interesting things.

The story centres on plans to raise the *Titanic* one century after it sank in 1912, a vague spirit of competition being provided by separate and (perhaps implausibly) radically different projects for tackling the two sections of the wreck. Some good, logical surprises emerge, while the narrative churns with Clarke's own thoughts (some half-baked and some undigested) on developments to come in fractals, brothels, computers, glassware, cryonics, even old movies — there's a wonderfully daft industry devoted to the digital editing of filthy old film-scenes which show people . . . smoking.

The Clarke world remains strangely bloodless and remote, as though all the drama and emotion were being observed at a chilly distance by his deep-sea probes hovering four kilometres down where the *Titanic* lies on the Grand Banks. Death, melodrama, insanity and sexual oddities are all happening somewhere, but only a purely intellectual excitement (tinged with melancholy) gets through to the page. Clarke knows his strengths, and *Ghost* concentrates mainly on things he's good at. It would, however, be

hard to imagine an ending that would unify and justify all the speculative loose ends in the book. Clarke merely pulls back his good old temporal zoom-lens for a bit of that familiar perspective-of-eternity which ought to chill but through long custom is really rather cosy.

In one place he's a bit naughty, explaining the fractal ramifications of the Mandelbrot Set with such care to keep it simple — by skating over the 'imaginary' numbers involved — that the explanation just doesn't explain. For enlightenment, turn to the boggling and profound *The Emperor's New Mind* by Roger Penrose (Vintage, 602 pp., £6.99), which will almost painlessly Make You Think about today's real problems in maths, physics and artificial intelligence.

'A video tape is being sent by Evangelists to schools nationwide warning children not to celebrate Hallowe'en because they would be "dabbling with the Devil",' reported *The Independent on Sunday* last October.

I soon heard the inside story from my own mole within Pandaemonium, the Great Parliament of Hell. It seems that Beelzebub started it all with a diabolically awkward enquiry at Question Time: 'What steps does His Infernal Highness propose to take about the shameful levity with which the Great Sabbat of Hallowe'en is now regarded by the general public?'

In his ensuing speech he pointed out with deep sarcasm that the dignity of Hell was seriously harmed by snotty-nosed kids running round in plastic masks trying to cadge sweeties. Recruitment to Satanic worship had fallen off badly thanks to this unfortunate association with giggling cries of 'Trick or treat.' Not to mention bleeding fantasy games, he added.

The massed daemonic ranks — who just like British politicians hate being laughed at — hissed their approval.

Replying on behalf of Ultimate Evil and the Foreign Office, Lord Moloch said that he had been working closely with his opposite number in the Evangelical Alliance to arrange a videotape campaign which would either restore the proper reverent regard for Hallowe'en or at least succeed in making a lot of Evangelists look very silly.

There was a standing ovation in Hell.

Meanwhile, Happy New Year. . . .

Critical Mass 7: Memory aids

SF and fantasy authors pinch their ideas from many places. Several have been inspired by Frances Yates's wonderful *The Art of Memory*, which everyone should read (this means you): all about the weird and ancient discipline of using architecture as a memory aid, by imagining vast buildings and filling them with luridly memorable images. Strolling mentally through cluttered corridors, you are supposed to find again the objects you mentally placed there and be reminded of detail after detail by this threatening figure, that cup, those ram's testicles (I don't know either, but that's what it says in the original Latin treatise quoted by Yates).

John Crowley in *Little, Big* has his mage Ariel Hawksquill use the Art for divination, on the believable and practical basis that the mnemonic images will change with time and provide short-cut access to what you know only unconsciously (this is the one aspect of the manipulations of astrology, tarot, and so on which makes perfect sense to me). In *Aegypt*, Crowley showed the Art being used — as it was in real life — by Giordano Bruno, the Renaissance hermetic philosopher.

Gene Wolfe uses it, too: his amnesiac hero Latro struggles to provide himself with an artificial, architectural memory in *Soldier of Arete*, and the idea underlies that deceptively cosy-seeming novel *Peace*, whose secrets unfold when you realize it's an ever-chillier tour through the decaying House of Memory of a hero who's long dead when the book begins. . . .

Now Ian Watson has extrapolated the Art along his own bizarre trajectories, in *The Flies of Memory* (Gollancz, 220 pp., £13.95). The alien 'Flies' don't use writing, but store their knowledge in a group memory based, once again, on architecture. Having run out of places of their own to use as mental information dumps, they visit Earth to upgrade their storage system by memorizing all *our* architecture. Only there are metaphysical complications.

The understructure of the universe, Watson suggests, is memory. If you're in tune with it — well, when humans interfere with the Flies' memory tourism, buildings and cities can be forgotten so thoroughly that they vanish from Earth. Which is merely the beginning.

Predictably unpredictable as ever, Watson proceeds by dizzy leaps to a finale haunted by solidifying memories of Hitler's rise to power in a Munich which has turned up again on Mars. Enough said. (Some of the metaphysics is reminiscent of his 1979 *God's World*.)

This is fine, far-out stuff, told by several female narrators in a variety of styles from mystical to zappy. Part 2 is the most stylistically uncomfortable, with a buttonholing, second-person narrative giving the feeling that this schizo young lady is talking at you from about three inches' range: you want to back away. I will not mention the puns.

It's vintage Watson and, like all his best work, fills you with boggle-ment salted with occasional irritation.

(The engraved-looking cover art, by Mike Litherland, is nice — Gollancz is phasing out its ghastly 'standard' jacket design, and not before time.)

Speaking of memory, some of the late great Philip K. Dick's best stories about thought and reality appear in *The Little Black Box* (Gollancz, 395 pp., £14.95). A personal favourite is 'The Electric Ant', whose hero discovers to his dismay that not only is he a machine, but his *entire* perception of the world is arriving not through his senses but from a tape unreeling in his chest (think about that, but not too hard). In 'We Can Remember It For You Wholesale', an impoverished tourist visits Mars by purchasing not a trip but implanted memories of a trip, little knowing that the implant technique will unearth his real, erased memories of a top-secret mission to Mars, whereupon. . . . Part of this story — though not much — was used as a peg on which to hang reels of movie action-adventure for *Total Recall*.

All the MPs who voted in our new, restrictive Official Secrets Act should be compelled to read the most utopian story Dick ever wrote, 'The Exit Door Leads In'.

As Thomas Disch indicates in the introduction, PKD was a great primitive writer who handled astonishing material in an undistinguished and sometimes downright clumsy style. The bright side is that he's always accessible and never, except perhaps in *Valis*, intimidating. (Someone once told James Thurber that if he could draw any better, he'd be lousy.)

This completes the five-volume collection of all Dick's short fiction, a worthy project indeed. The others are *Beyond Lies the Wub*, *Second Variety*, *The Father-Thing* and *The Days of Perky Pat*. Grafton is doing the paperbacks.

Arranging the hardbacks on the shelf and looking at their spines, you see that the last two titles are annoyingly out of line and that Dick's name is split over two lines in two different ways. This is a Nearly Matched Set. But Gollancz has just acquired a new art director.

Two more fat anthologies for short story fans: *Best New SF 4* edited by Gardner Dozois (Robinson, 598 pp., £6.99) and *Best New Horror* edited by Stephen Jones and Ramsey Campbell (Robinson, 390 pp., £6.99). The SF collection, covering the best of 1989, is masterfully chosen and excellent value at 1.17 pence per crammed page. I'm sure the horror volume (not so much my kind of thing) is a good selection, but why does it cost over 50 per cent more per page of fewer words? To pay for the foil on the jacket?

Still speaking of memory. . . .

Boring old reviewers, such as myself, like to go on about how they have Read It All Before. This isn't so much a languid Oscar Wilde pose ('There is only one thing worse than having read it before, and that is . . . not having read it before!') as an occupational hazard.

Thus I opened *Enchanted Pilgrimage* by Clifford Simak (Mandarin, 218 pp., £3.99), a routine-looking fantasy quest with SF garnish, and about three-quarters of the way through found it was getting a shade too familiar. Where had I read before about a Lovecraftian 'Chaos Beast' giving posthumous birth to a cute robot? Yes, in Methuen's identical 1985 paperback, not even hinted at on this reprint's copyright page.

So, like most later Simak, *Pilgrimage* is inoffensive and forgettable, just saved from oblivion by a few dotty ideas and a faint whiff of his old Midwestern pastoral charm. To find his best stuff, check original copyright dates for the period 1951 (*Time and Again*) to 1965 (*All Flesh is Grass*). From 1953 there's *Ring Around the Sun* (Mandarin, 205 pp., £3.50), a dated but still nifty tale of magical science and economic attack on poor old Earth. This diabolical assault takes the form of razor blades, light bulbs, cars, etc., that *never wear out*. Tremble in your shoes, Earthling industrialists!

I remember the NFT launch party for Terry Pratchett's *Moving Pictures* (Gollancz, 279 pp., £12.95). I definitely remember there was wine. Lots of wine. No popcorn, but wine. Terry was there somewhere. So was a lot more wine. 'People don't want to listen to speeches at these things,' said hero Gollancz editor Richard Evans: 'We're here to get pissed.' I remember I agreed and had some wine. One flaw in the Art of Memory is that it doesn't seem to help at all with locating bottles of paracetamol.

More, if I remember, next month. . . .

Critical Mass 8: Fix-ups

One of the seediest terms in SF criticism was invented by A. E. van Vogt: 'fix-up', the result of bolting together vaguely related short stories and calling them a novel. When the stories aren't particularly connected, you get the famous van Vogt effect of thrilling, heady incoherence. But 'fix-up' also covers works of real genius like Keith Roberts's *Pavane*, so it's not mere abuse.

As On a Darkling Plain by Ben Bova (Mandarin, 189 pp., £3.99) is a fix-up of the most irritating kind: an unremarkable SF novelette inflated to book length with unrelated tales of exploration. The frame story is about these puzzling alien machines on the moon Titan (influence: 'The Sentinel' by Arthur C. Clarke). What is their dark secret? In order not to find out, Earth rushes a futile expedition into the high-pressure depths of Jupiter (embarrassingly strong influence: *The Dragon in the Sea* by Frank Herbert) and another to, of all places, Sirius. As someone nervously explains, 'Nobody expects us to find anything.'

Only near the end does anyone stoop to the obvious by taking a scientific look at the Titan installation. This machinery, based on technology far beyond our own, does indeed have a sinister purpose . . . to wipe out the human race! What's more, it's been doing it without pause for several millennia already. Inscrutable, these alien johnnies, but fortunately we saw through their plot just in time.

An awful book. Still, I treasure the scientific insight whereby people who've been modified to breathe water notice that their submarine voices are 'a bit slower and deeper than normal'. Also lower in information content, surely: not so much 'His gill rate is getting critical!' (an actual line) as *'Glub, glub, glub.'*

When is a fix-up not a fix-up? When it reads that way because several collaborators haven't managed to mesh very well, as in *Close Encounters? Science and Science Fiction* by Roger Lambourne, Michael Shallis and Michael Shortland (Adam Hilger, 184 pp., no price visible). This is a feeble book about the science in SF . . . no, in the central chapters it's a good essay about how SF movies have presented or caricatured scientists . . . with digressions on any movie an author feels like mentioning (sometimes two appear to discuss the same film at length, independently, in different chapters) . . . but then there's a random dose of ecology stuff, and a weird chapter on religion which gets quite alarmist about the possibility that Spielberg's *ET* might have the 'effect of undermining traditional religious thought'. Blimey.

This bittiness is not, as nasty reviewers might suspect, a mistake. The introduction says openly that the book is not intended to offer any argument, reach any conclusion, or form a unified whole. 'This diversity . . . is one of the qualitites [sic] that distinguishes [sic] this book from others that have dealt with similar subjects.' The result is a mass of inoffensive writing with rambling, patchy SF coverage and a heavy cinematic bias. Perhaps the authors — all university lecturers — were tired of student essays crammed with boring old arguments and conclusions.

Another kind of fix-up is the Art Potboiler, containing heaps of unrelated jacket pictures strung together with

tongue-in-cheek narrative. Chris Foss's *Diary of a Spaceperson* (Paper Tiger, 143 pp., £16.95) is the usual travelogue, described as a 'sensual and spiritual odyssey'. 'Sensual' indicates that the heroine enjoys many a tasteful bonk with all sexes and species, 'spiritual' that she has dope-dreams to justify the weirder paintings in the Foss studio. . . .

It looks terrific: Paper Tiger's production is always superb, though I wearied of their hard-to-read 'handwritten' typeface (the text is skippable). Chris 'Enormous Machinery With Windows' Foss has a distinctive airbrushed style which gives his big set-pieces an overall unity, no matter how inconsistent their details might be. Meanwhile, Chris 'I Also Illustrated *The Joy Of Sex*' Foss contributes mildly raunchy pencil drawings . . . no hard porn, but a nipple count in the mid-eighties.

With its severely technophilic cover, this should do well with frustrated SF fans too embarrassed to be seen reading *Playboy* or *Knave*. Guardians of our morals will not approve.

It's always cheering to find a new British writer. Jenny Jones's *Fly By Night* (Headline, 499 pp., £4.99) is a promising debut, a good gloomy fantasy that builds on an old SF metaphor about immortality and sterility to produce quite a new feel.

It begins conventionally enough, with the traditional importation from our 'real' world of a useless-seeming saviour (Eleanor) who isn't much of a person but is clearly destined to grow and to end the unchanging stasis that freezes the twilit fantasy domain. Jones then conscientiously tangles the often too-simple issues of good and evil. Most people on the 'wrong' side are likeable, perhaps just a little selfish: contrast Western civilization and the suffering Third World. The moon-goddess on the 'right' side destroys an innocent bystander in a shockingly gratuitous way, merely to underline her authority. Few characters are certain that they're doing the right thing, or that it will lead to the right end.

This being a first novel, there are several minor flaws, mainly stylistic — like the overused word 'exigent', a Stephen Donaldson favourite. But it kept me reading and, despite opening a trilogy, came to a satisfying conclusion.

I must admit that Games Workshop have sorted out some of their books' image problems. *Warhammer 40,000: Inquisitor* by Ian Watson (GW Books, 246 pp., £4.99) has a bold and legible silver-foil title on the cover. The jacket artwork remains terrible, but less so than on earlier titles.

Ian Watson is a brave man. Not only does he put his own name on this thing, but he's evidently read all the *Warhammer 40K* rules: *Inquisitor* is conscientiously larded with stuff about Genestealers, warps, demons, assassins, kinky deformities . . . even a cute dwarf. Weighted down by this, the great innovator of British SF tells a galaxy-spanning but remarkably ordinary tale, reminiscent of the early Moorcock on a bad day. It's the start of a trilogy.

I tactfully asked the author how he regarded *Inquisitor*, and he evasively replied that it was very much the SF book he'd wanted to read when he was fifteen. If you're a doddering sixteen-year-old or even more senile than that, you have been warned.

In brief. . . .

Arthur C. Clarke struck dread into my heart with a 'sensational new first chapter' for his little classic *Childhood's End* (Pan, 200 pp, £3.99). I was afraid he'd spoil the bloom, but the update amounts to two rewritten pages at the start. . . . Later in the same chapter, although this is supposed to be the twenty-first century, the technology is still 'electron tubes' (valves). This remains the one book where Clarke's mysticism really works and leaves no loose ends.

In a anthology not yet released over here, Isaac Asimov is honoured by SF pals and admirers: *Foundation's Friends* (Tor, 464 pp., $4.95). These stories set in Asimov's universes contain a lot of routine pastiche (like Poul Anderson setting up a laws-of-robotics quibble too finicky even for Asimov to have used), but there are gems. In particular there is Orson Scott Card, an author I've never much liked in the past, whose 'The Originist' could well be the best Foundation/Empire story ever written.

Perhaps I've softened towards 'shared world anthologies' since writing some stories for new British ventures. I'll tell you more next time. (I didn't, though. I forgot.)

Critical Mass 9: Dream parks

For role-playing gamers, the affordable edition of *The Barsoom Project* by Larry Niven and Steven Barnes (Pan, 340 pp., £4.50) presumably came as the first major treat of 1991. For mere interested spectators (me) it's still a pretty good read.

The book follows the general pattern of their earlier *Dream Park*, with minor links to the same authors' thin little technothriller *The Descent of Anansi*. Dream Park is the ultimate in live-action game environments, with holographic effects and a vast supporting technology like an extrapolated Disneyland. Once again a game is in progress, with twists: the fantasy background is unusual (Eskimo) and the purpose partly 'educational' (a lose-weight game for fatties). Once again there's huge intrigue behind the scenes: crimes and machinations and an alternate use of Dream Park for planetarium-style presentation of an ambitious 'real world' Mars program, as per title. You keep turning the pages.

Yes, it's solid and well-researched SF, a nifty read if taken at face value. But when you pause to think, there are niggles. One whole narrative thread lacks tension because, no matter how well told, it's still just people playing a game. Then consider Disneyland, which turns a profit on its *much* cheaper and lower-tech sideshows only by processing umpteen thousand visitors a day: here a party of ten gamers is monopolizing vast resources for days on end, and whatever they paid it wasn't enough. (There's some feeble attempt at justifying this by saying the whole thing will later be packaged for domestic video sales. Ho hum.)

It is also irritating that no argument against the authors' much-loved but fantastically expensive space project is even expressed . . . and worrying that Dream Park resources are used extra-legally to give the villain an unpleasant and fatal come-uppance. There would not be that much moral difference if the book's President of the USA favoured policies which would lead to closing down Dream Park and/or the space program, and the 'good guys' responded by democratically assassinating *him*.

In the main, Niven and Barnes are writing enjoyable wish-fulfilment. Ignore the propaganda, remember the glad fact that Californian SF writers have little if any real political power, and you can't help liking it.

There's always another book about the famous Inklings group (principally Tolkien, C. S. Lewis and

Charles Williams): the latest is *The Magical World of the Inklings* by Gareth Knight (Element, 258 pp., £9.99). Knight seems to want to put the creations of these very Christian authors into a broader, vaguer context of occult tradition and ceremonial magic, but he makes so little effort to organize his material that nothing much comes of it.

The book consists chiefly of wearisome plot summaries — of all Lewis's and Williams's fiction, the *Silmarillion*, and the non-fictional works of Owen Barfield (with which I'm not familiar). From time to time Knight waxes enthusiastic about random occult connections. He reels in amazement that the very widely read Lewis should have quoted some snippet of esoteric lore in *That Hideous Strength*. He later suggests that Tolkien, to create his worlds, simply must have had 'imaginative access to the record on the subtle ethers of all that has ever happened'. This sounds deeply patronizing, like Erich von Daniken explaining that our 'primitive' ancestors could never have invented anything without alien assistance.

The low point is a straight-faced transcript of what you might call role-playing or group therapy (Knight calls it High Magic), with punters acting out a visit to Tolkien's western isles and undergoing much dire spiritual uplift: no swordplay or such vulgar stuff, but heavy elvish insights like, 'I get the feeling they think our time oriented existence is pretty weird.' Here Knight drones on about healing and regeneration without addressing the possibility that Tolkien, as a Catholic, would have liked to kick the participants' bottoms and advise them to go to church for that kind of thing.

I must confess a lack of sympathy for writing that can't describe a minor coincidence without adding that it was 'perhaps by a divine or occultly inspired synchronicity', and which remains so consistently foggy about its own philosophical standpoint. (Too occult to be revealed, maybe.) Of all the books about the Inklings, this must be the most dispensable.

Also on the mystical side is *The Bruce Pennington Portfolio* (Paper Tiger, 28 plates, £9.95) . . . which might sound expensive, but really it's 28 paintings on individual 42 x 29 cm sheets of heavy paper, suitable for framing if you can bear to cut up the book. (Though if you can bear to cut up any book, I do not wish to know you.) There is also a brief introduction which scatters a few biographical details but neglects to say anything about the actual choice of paintings.

Most are SF and fantasy book covers from the 1970s, omitting the famous cover art of *Dune*. 1980s specimens include two — not, alas, all four — of the splendid architectural covers done for 'The Book of the New Sun', and some weirdly evocative pictures from Pennington's recent and more private work. Exotic, fluorescent colours predominate. Heady stuff.

Matching portfolios in the series feature Jim Burns, Chris Foss and Rodney Matthews.

Here by way of light relief is a hard-bitten fantasy police thriller in a series by Simon R. Green, a new British author: *Devil Take the Hindmost* (Headline, 201 pp., £3.50). Hawk (he) and Fisher (she) are tough city cops, I mean Guard Captains. 'People tended to be very law-abiding when Hawk and Fisher were around.' There is a crooked election coming up. And they have to protect the nicest of the candidates from a sticky end. With mercenaries, magic, abominable gods and household traitors to contend with. Often in short sentence fragments. Like this. Sounds like trouble. . . .

It's fairly routine stuff, but the plot thickens enough to give it interest, and I can guarantee an absence of quests, Dark Lords, cute nonhuman races and (for the most part) archaic syntax. Perhaps, as the series continues, Green will add more colour to the prose and flesh to the characters: his opening in particular has a schematic feel, and the story improves further on. (I could also do with less of the clashing blades and people carving paths through crowds, but that's just me.) Good marks for incidental invention, such as the city's eccentric lesser gods.

(Later note: re-reading the above, it looks as though I liked Green's empty little entertainment more than the Niven/Barnes blockbuster . . . which isn't really true. Green simply offers nothing much to quarrel with, while Niven and Barnes offer lots.)

Not many books can really 'change your life', but if you happen to be terrified of numbers and statistics, I do recommend *Innumeracy: Mathematical Illiteracy and its Consequences* by John Allen Paulos (Penguin, 135 pp., £3.99). It's easy reading, with many examples of how shock-horror figures should be taken with a pinch of mathematical salt. One case discussed is the media sensation a few years back about the much-publicized statistic that 28 young D&D players had . . . committed suicide!

Alarming? Listen to Paulos: 'There are estimates that up to 3 million teenagers played it. Second, in that age group the annual [US] suicide rate is approximately 12 per 100,000. These two facts together suggest that the number of teenage "Dungeons and Dragons" players who could be expected to commit suicide is about 360!'

I don't remember any fundamentalist/media scare about the statistic implied by these (doubtless incomplete) figures: that teenagers were nearly twelve times more likely to commit suicide if they *didn't* play D&D. . . .

— Dave Langford, February 1991

ROGER WEDDALL who is a famous Melbourne fannish personality and social butterfly who is *not* currently running a convention or publishing a newszine, although he is still a member of ANZAPA.
ELAINE COCHRANE is married to the editor (and even lives in the same house), leaving this magazine open to the usual charges of nepotism and cronyism that keep fandom the bright, happy family we all know and love. I can live with this. What gripes me is that Elaine writes much better than I do.
I introduced **WYNNE WHITEFORD** earlier in this issue, but failed to mention that although he is nowhere near twice as old as I am, he does have twice the energy.
Occasionally **GREG HILLS** is seen separated from his computer, which is the publication powerhouse of *Thyme* magazine. Greg has made himself into an expert in Wordperfect 5.1, and is willing to offer advice and accept payment for his expertise.
I've introduced **ROS GROSS** elsewhere in this issue.

Roger Weddall ❖ Michael J. Tolley ❖ Elaine Cochrane ❖ Wynne Whiteford ❖ Greg Hills ❖ Roslyn Gross

CRITICANTO

KEATS AND SIMMONS

Roger Weddall reviews

HYPERION
by Dan Simmons

Headline 0 7472 0243 5; 1989; 346 pp.; £7.99/A$19.95

THE FALL OF HYPERION
by Dan Simmons

Headline 0 7472 7964 0; 1991; 468 pp.; A$34.95

(This reviewed appeared first in *Ethel the Aardvark*, No. 38, September 1991.)

The first this reviewer heard of *Hyperion* was words of highest praise: 'magnificently original'; 'masterfully employing sf's potential'; and 'one of the finest sf novels' were some of the phrases bandied about. Since these words were uttered, the novel has gone on to win awards, and its proclaimed sequel *The Fall of Hyperion* has also attracted much favourable commentary. Leaving aside for a moment the question of how justified the acclaim has been, one thing that can be stated with confidence is that this work — the pair of books — is an ambitious one. Few enough science fiction novels (how many can you think of?) attempt to address the question of the human dilemma: what is it to live and die; to love; and to suffer?

It is an ironic work, too, in that while sf is often said to be the 'literature of ideas' there is essentially nothing new here in the way of ideas, nor even perhaps in the way of plot or theme. What is new, and interesting to look at, is how Dan Simmons has taken the poetry and much detail of the life of John Keats and used these as his raw materials in much the same way as a tarot reader might use a tarot deck of cards to give a reading. The critical question here might be whether he has used the material, or simply rearranged it.

The first clue for the unsuspecting reader is that the titles of Simmons's two novels are the titles of two long poems by Keats — both of which were left unfinished, and the latter of which was published posthumously. The closing lines of both versions of *The Fall of Hyperion* are the same.

It doesn't matter where one looks, or how deeply, there are echoes of Keats — his life and works — to be found aplenty. A good example of Simmons's literary gamesmanship is that, as in the case of Keats's poem, *Hyperion* the novel does not 'end' (it being the first half of the larger work), while *The Fall of Hyperion* the novel is completed or 'published' only after the death of the computer-created persona of John Keats who is — appropriately enough — the heart and soul of the work.

Another example: in real life, Keats's love was a woman named Fanny Brawne, and 'Lamia' was a poem of his in which, refusing to pass judgement on human behaviour, Keats, spent time 'trying to discuss with himself what life was really like' (Robert Gittings, *John Keats' Poems*). In Simmons's novel the lover of the Keats persona is one Brawne Lamia who, coincidentally, brings into question what human behaviour and life are really like.

There are countless other examples; indeed, the novel is made up of them. As a tribute to Keats, as a pastiche of his work or a sort of literary puzzle, Dan Simmons's work is an impressive achievement. To this reviewer it seems a pity that a better book, or books, haven't resulted from the effort.

Paradoxically, it is when Dan Simmons is most removed from the shadow of Keats that he is both at his worst and his best. In what this reviewer found to be a most distracting narrative device, the novel *Hyperion* begins with seven strangers brought together to be sent on a pilgrimage, during which they swap Canterbury tales with each other. There is no real reason for them having been thus assembled, it turns out, other than to give the author the chance to spin a few good yarns. Of course there is a tie-in to Keats's work, some of which had Chaucer as its subject.

The novel gives much importance to the pilgrimage, which sends the main characters to confront the Shrike, a religious and possibly

mythical figure. Sadly, and far too many hundred pages later, it is established that the Shrike is neither mythical nor a religious figure. It is a Plot Device. A fairly nasty Plot Device, to be sure, which wanders mysteriously from place to place, eviscerating citizens as required by the dictates of the story. In the end, since it must be done away with, it is done away with by even better (if slightly more cliched *deus ex machina* — a person who Suddenly Develops a Superpower (or was it there all along?). It is meant to suggest the miraculous potential of the human race but, displayed without adequate preparation, it comes across as a fix-it solution to the problems of the plot.

Simply put, the framework Simmons puts into place to hold his recasting of Keats's work conspicuously doesn't measure up, and the reader who expects a resolution of the plot(s) may feel cheated. Similarly, in this epic space opera the characters are all drawn on the grand scale. As part of a fast-paced action-adventure story they are adequate, but at times when Simmons focuses on the people themselves and what droves them to love or betray or persevere, they are uniformly found wanting. Moments of what are clearly meant to be great sacrifice or tragedy are cruelly reduced to the level of farce because the reader has been given no reason to identify with the suffering of the characters.

If Simmons at his worst is plot devices, cardboard characterization and lots of pretentious stuff about the place of the poet/writer in society, at his best he is an extremely competent writer of slick detective fiction, with a good sense of how to pace a story. Several of his pilgrims' tales are well spun, even enthralling, and when he isn't constrained by the need to dovetail all his vast Big Story plot ends, he's a pleasure to read (which isn't something to be said for *too* many authors). I'll be looking around for his shorter fiction. In the meantime I can recommend *Hyperion* and *The Fall of Hyperion* together as one of the most interesting, ambitious failures in the field of science fiction.

TOO DIFFERENT BY HALF

Roger Weddall reviews

THE DIFFERENCE ENGINE
by William Gibson
and Bruce Sterling

Gollancz 0 575 05073 X; 1990;
383 pp.; £7.99 tpb/A$23.95

Suddenly it seems all the rage for people to share their fictional creations around. There are sequels and prequels to famous novels, written 'in partnership'; there are even shared universes and shared characters. Just how much more sociable, one wonders, can the science fiction writing community become?

How much of this phenomenon is market driven? It's anyone's guess who wants what more: the publishers to deliver a conveyor-belt diet of the safe and the known, or the reading public to consume the same, a commodity that is familiar yet slightly different.

One thing that is not open to debate is that both William Gibson and Bruce Sterling are popular authors, each for a different variety of fascinating if somewhat sensationalized cyberpunk fiction. Surely a collaboration between these two sf luminaries would be a wonderful thing to see?

Maybe. If 'cyberpunk' is the sort of fiction that features grotty, gritty, inter-city settings, high-tech gadgetry and a certain punk, street-wise attitude shown by the characters, Gibson and Sterling have succeeded in writing a cyberpunk novel, set in the nineteenth century, no less. This should be enough to please most of their devotees.

However, for the casual reader, interested in reading an interesting well-plotted novel and not caring whether or not the hero wears mirrorshades, will this be enough?

The Difference Engine is set for the most part in Victorian England in the year 1855 in a world in which, some thirty years earlier, Charles Babbage did not just theorize about the creation of an 'analytical engine' (early computer) but actually built one, driven by steam rather than electricity.

Since then, there have been, as they say, developments. The industrial revolution is in full swing. Political changes have come fast and thick. The hereditary upper class, for instance, has been all but hunted down and killed. The upper house of the British parliament has been replaced by a chamber filled with those granted 'merit lordships' — a cross between an old-boys' club and a Thatcherite fantasy, for those who really 'deserve to rule'.

Given that the middle of the nineteenth century was such a time of social and economic upheaval — such an *interesting* time, as the Chinese would say — the reader might think that, with a few science fictional touches, the authors could hardly put a foot wrong in creating a plausible alternative world.

Certainly, for much of the book the authors avoid tedious explanations of how everything is different from the world we know. More is the pity, then, that toward the novel's end this admirable self-restraint is forgotten. The authors offer, under the pretentious chapter heading 'Modus: The Images Tabled', an odd mixture of pamphlets, poetry and private reminiscences to provide information that the reader should know. It seems that Gibson and Sterling have become too caught up in their imagined milieu to judge where the demands of the story should take precedence over the details of the background.

This is the conflict on which the novel founders. Perhaps it arises because there are two authors, not one. There's no obvious conflict between authors in controlling the plot. The conflict goes much deeper: are we reading a novel about the birth of the communist movement, as it struggles to topple the existing social order, or are we reading a simple series of sketches about an imagined alternative Victorian era?

The problem with reading *The Difference Engine* as a series of sketches is that the reader is constantly being urged to regard it as a novel. The work is broken into five 'iterations', and each begins with a fairly stilted description of a static image. Consider how *The Difference Engine* begins:

> Composite image, optically encoded by escort-craft of the trans-Channel airship *Lortd Brunel*: aerial view of suburban Cherbourg, 14 October 1905.
>
> A villa, a garden, a balcony.
>
> Erase the balcony's wrought-iron curves, exposing a bath chair and its occupant. . . .

Although each 'iteration' begins

with a similarly clumsy start, it soon becomes clear that the book itself tells a story of some intrigue. Is this a novel, or a collection of linked stories? The problem is that each story ends as summarily as it begins.

In the first 'iteration' a London prostitute is caught up in a web of political intrigue that uproots her from her lodgings, kills her boyfriend-cum-customer, and showers her with an unlikely fortune. But will she get away in one piece from the man who might kill her to regain this fortune?

> Justification of background detail . . . [of a] surreptitiously daguerrotyped image . . . [reveals the two characters very close to one another, unaware of each other's presence].
> She is Sybil Gerard.
> He is Samuel Houston.
> Their paths diverge forever.

Some of the writing in this book is extremely precious, none more so than the sentences devoted to the progressive evolution of the world's first artificial intelligence. I find it hard to understand why this plot albatross had to be introduced in the first place, as it adds nothing relevant or interesting to the book. One can almost imagine the publisher's editor arguing that every cyberpunk novel must have an artificial intelligence in it.

What is harder to imagine is either William Gibson or Bruce Sterling being willing to take credit for the following lines, which close the book:

> Dying to be born.
> The light is strong,
> The light is clear;
> The Eye [AI] at last must see itself
> Myself . . .
> I see:
> I see,
> I see
> I
> !

Who needs to write an unfavourable review of the book, with prose like that to recommend it?

The characters of *The Difference Engine* are an oddly mixed lot. The 'dollymop' Sybil, already mentioned, is portrayed well enough for the reader to empathize with her in her dilemma: should she leave her comfortable enough life for an uncertain shot at a better life? She is a strong character with frailties, a bold but frightened person.

Most of the other characters are collections of attibutes: the femme fatal, distant but impossible naïve; the southern-county Englishman, stolid, bumbling, shy; the case-hardened copper. They are linked by their slightly metaphysical bent, so that at random they theorize on the existence or otherwise of an All-Seeing Eye.

You should enjoy *The Difference Engine* if you don't look too hard at the use of new technologies, you ignore the parade of famous names, and try not to regret that the whole novel doesn't follow the fortunes of Sybil Gerard. Borrow this from your library rather than buy it.

OF UNICORNS AND AIDS

Elaine Cochrane reviews

UNICORN MOUNTAIN
by Michael Bishop

Arbor House/Morrow
ISBN 0 87795 953 6, 1988;
$US18.95 hb, 367 pp.

When Libby Quarrel's worthless ex-husband tells her that his cousin Beaumont is in Atlanta, dying of AIDS and rejected by his family, Libby scrapes together the money to go and fetch him home to her struggling Colorado ranch.

She is worried, about the financial burden, about whether she can provide adequate care, about the medical services available in the nearest town.

In particular, she is worried about the impact of a stranger on the secret of the Tipsy Q. Every winter, to the wonder and delight of Libby and her hired help, Sam Coldpony, a small number of unicorns have migrated to the ranch. Each year there have been more, but the unicorns are sick: pitifully thin, with sores and bloody nasal discharges. A few have died, and their bodies vanish back into the world from which they have come.

Sam Coldpony, self-exiled from the Muache Ute community, believes the unicorns are sacred creatures, sent by the Holy He-She. His care for them is a sacred duty, holy of itself. He hopes forlornly he will be rewarded by reconciliation with the daughter he deserted in infancy; he does not dare hope to be freed from the vengeful spirit of his dead wife.

On the long drive from Atlanta to Colorado, Libby repeatedly and embarrassingly asks Bo why he is homosexual. She does not see that her painfully conscious attempt at tolerance amounts to a rejection of Bo's sexuality. I squirmed in guilty identification.

Bo himself has a stereotypical verbal agility and creative flair. The name Beaumont alone would cause him problems in some circles. Bishop has deliberately chosen these cliché characteristics — and then shows that these surface features are irrelevant to the real and complex man.

I found my expectations were continually being undercut as I read. Bishop's characters are complex — they irritate and misunderstand each other and themselves; they misinterpret events around them; they remain silent when it is painfully necessary for them to explain themselves — in other words, they behave like real people.

The unicorns' illness parallels Bo's own. Bo himself says they are suffering from a kind of equine AIDS. There is a subtly conveyed feeling, never stated by any of the characters, that if they can save the unicorns they can save Bo. It is one of the strengths of this book that, amidst the fantasy, the only miracle that Bishop offers is the unicorns themselves.

NUMBNESS

Elaine Cochrane reviews

THE M.D.: A HORROR STORY
by Thomas M. Disch

Knopf 0 394 58662 X,
New York, 1991;
$US22, $Can29, $A30.95, 401 pp.

When Sister Symphorosa tells her kindergarten class that there is no Santa Claus, Billy Michaels throws a tantrum. For Billy has *seen* Santa Claus, and for him to deny this would be blasphemy.

After Billy has heard the same thing from his father, Santa Claus appears to him in a different guise. He is no longer the jolly fat man in a red suit, but the god Mercury, '[t]he god of thieves and criminals, but also the god of doctors and of businessmen.' Mercury gives Billy a caduceus, and the power to use the caduceus to perform magic.

Billy is warned that he cannot use the caduceus to undo any spell that he has cast, and that the power of the caduceus grows with use. He is also told that he cannot use the caduceus to kill directly, although it can be used to impart fatal diseases. Mercury has said he doesn't concern himself with 'bad' and 'good', but Billy soon learns that the power grows only when it is used to inflict deliberate harm. Attempts to do good weaken it, even when they backfire horribly. And Billy's spells do have a habit of backfiring, and of working on the wrong victim.

Billy's tantrum showed a child who rejected what he did not want to hear. This does not change, and as he gets older, Billy becomes skilled in using the caduceus to punish those who make his life uncomfortable in any way.

At times Billy regrets his actions, but he is unwilling to give up his power. He must keep using it to do harm if he is to be able to use it to do good. The way to avoid facing the consequences is to choose more and more anonymous victims. Eventually, Doctor William Michaels is concerned just with power for its own sake. In his own words, 'It is the oldest irony of the medical profession that physicians seem to profit from other people's misfortunes.'

As always, Disch's writing is witty, lucid, a joy to read. I romped through this book, and it is only on going back to certain passages to write this review that the care with which it is constructed became apparent. And yet, to me at least, it is an unsatisfactory novel, and does not live up to its description as a horror story. Certainly it describes horrible events, and the character of William Michaels becomes abhorrent, but neither the events nor the character evoked a feeling of horror. They did not evoke much feeling at all. Mercury says to Michaels: '. . . [Y]ou've simply grown numb. It's an occupational hazard. Over the years most doctors become more cold-blooded than generals.' This numbness is the real horror, but the reader shares it instead of recoiling from it.

The problem is one of scale. William Michaels' moral decay takes place over a span of thirty years. At intervals his life is sampled, demonstrating his steadily deteriorating moral state. In this it is effective, but it does not allow the reader to develop any sort of feeling for the character.

And the events? To maintain his power, Michaels has to inflict harm. Eventually he learns to remain remote from the hurt he causes by choosing victims who are, and will remain, anonymous to him. They are also anonymous and remote from the reader. The statistics are horrible, as are the statistics of Tien An Men Square, Ethiopia, Dachau. A feeling of horror comes not from statistics, but from the image of the lone man standing in front of a tank, of the baby with blank eyes at a dry breast, of living skeletons. The real horror may be the ability of the human mind to distance itself from the evil that people can and do inflict on each other, but it is an abstract horror, not a horror that is felt.

In the heart of his medical empire, Dr Michaels listens to a CD of Scott Ross playing Scarlatti sonatas. Even here, though, the death from AIDS of this brilliant musician is a loss I feel intellectually. There is no suffering the music of Scott Ross: while I regret his death, it does not have the emotional impact on me of, for example, the much-reproduced photograph of a haggard young man in a wheelchair at an early AIDS conference in San Francisco, or the rictus of a Romanian baby. Disch tells us that people are suffering and dying, but he does not make us feel it.

Other aspects of the book irritate. Take the messages from the dead: their content serves a purpose in the plot, but the existence of the messages introduces a stray and irrelevant complication. There are medical 'explanations' at the end, which do not explain all and so create loose ends rather than tie them off. Above all, however, is the disappointment that I, for one, just didn't care what happened to anyone in the book.

SLIMMER STILL

Elaine Cochrane reviews

MONA LISA OVERDRIVE
by William Gibson

Gollancz 0 575 04020 3, 1988;
£10.95 hb, 251 pp.

Mona Lisa Overdrive is a pastiche of names which impinge upon each other briefly and more or less accidentally. After the impact the survivors continue with their lives. True, some of the names continue in changed circumstances, but there is little character behind the names before, and no development of character after, the impact.

Mona is sixteen, a prostitute and drug addict, who happens to resemble Angie, star of the virtual reality entertainments called simstims. There is Kumiko, teenage daughter of a yakuza boss, and Slick Henry, who builds giant robots in an industrial wasteland. Various other names attach to other activities, like hacking into cyberspace, which seems to be a cross between a do-it-yourself virtual reality and a world-wide computer network.

The reason for the impact is that various names have information about other names. We all know that knowledge is power, and that people — even dead ones — will kill for power, don't we? Two hundred and fifty pages is a fairly slim book, but the plot of *Mona Lisa Overdrive* is more slender still.

Gibson can write readable prose; it's a pity he doesn't put it to better purpose.

EATING CROCODILES CAN BE FUN

Elaine Cochrane reviews

BLUE MOON RISING
by Simon Green

VGSF 0 575 05136 1, 1991;
£7.99 tr pb, 448 pp.

Some years ago I read an essay by Edmund Wilson in which he demonstrated ruthlessly just how ridiculous Hemingway's *To Have and Have Not* was. I read the essay, agreed with every point, but at the end I decided it did not matter: I'd enjoyed the book.

I do not need a Wilson to point out the many problems in Green's book. The passage of time is handled awkwardly and too often the writing degenerates into cliché; the motives of both goodies and baddies are implausibly simple; the plot develops fairly predictably; the nasty beasties have impossible predator/prey ratios; the heroine is that new stereotype, a dolt who hits first and asks questions later (why does a strong woman have to be an aggressive woman?); the hero is the new stereotype Sensitive Male who prefers not to kill his dragon and who doesn't mind that his princess isn't a virgin.

And yet . . . I *like* the book. When

Green can escape the cliches the writing is lively, often humorous:

> Something stirred in the moat, and Julia peered dubiously at the shifting scum covering the murky waters.
>
> 'Do you keep crocodiles in your moat, Rupert?'
>
> 'Not any more,' said Rupert absently, keeping a watchful eye on the huge double doors at the other end of the Keep. 'We used to, but then something set up home in the moat and ate them all.'
>
> 'What was it?'
>
> 'We're not sure,' said Rupert. 'It doesn't really matter; if it can eat crocodiles, it can certainly guard a moat. . . .'

Blue Moon Rising is an enjoyable, light-hearted adventure fantasy. I'll be interested to read Green's next book — it could be even better.

LINEAR, HO HUM

Elaine Cochrane reviews

METROPHAGE
by Richard Kadrey

Gollancz 0 575 04291 5, 1988; £11.95, 240 pp.

A disintegrated future Los Angeles exists in a state of sporadic civil war between assorted street gangs and tribal groups, well-organized racketeers, and the Orwellian-named Committee of Public Health. When a new and horrible disease breaks out, the Committee attempts an all-out assault on the city.

Jonny Qabbala is a pusher, distributing hard drugs and black-market medicines, and occasionally running as courier and go-between for the powerful. He has his own private war to fight, and cares little about the city or the continuing wars in the world outside.

Jonny knows he is insignificant, and he cannot understand when all the warring factions seem to want him. He is even more confused when each party gives him a different reason — reasons which, however genuine, he knows have no basis in fact. Each time he runs, more of those who have helped him are dead, more of the city falls to the Committee, and he is as far from settling his own scores as ever.

With Kadrey's gritty, readable style, *Metrophage* has the makings of a satisfactory adventure novel. Unfortunately, the plot is disappointingly linear, with each new incident seemingly tacked on rather than integral to some deeper design. The background Los Angeles is vivid, but does not bear examination. And the explanation finally given is both ho-hum and invalidated by much of the lead-up. However, as this is a first novel there may be hope for better from Kadrey in the future.

CREDIBLE SUPERMAN

Wynne Whiteford reviews

BRAIN CHILD
by George Turner

William Morrow 0 688 10595 5; 407 pp., US$20, A$28.50

Whatever classification you like to assign to it — science fiction or political novel — *Brain Child* is arguably one of the best novels to come out of Australia.

Superficially, you could call it a superman story, one of that long line of narratives featuring a being who is, in some way, representative of the next step upward in evolution beyond the normal Joe Blow. But it is far more than this.

Many writers, with varying degrees of believability, have tried to portray a superhuman being. These range from the recent archetype Clark Kent back to Gilgamesh and Shamash-Naphashtim the Remote, of the First Babylonian Empire, and the gods of old Egypt.

But George Turner has, I think, come up with one of the most credible scenarios in this line that has continued for thousands of years. He has neatly sidestepped the main disadvantage of a story with a superhuman hero — the problem of reader identification. How can the reader worry about a character who can't lose — a man who meets the most bizarre threat by finding a phone booth (before they were made of glass), changing into a cloak and leotard, then outflying an F-18? Turner, with the accumulated experience of novels like *The Sea and Summer* and *The Cupboard under the Stairs*, has avoided this pitfall by using the Watson/Holmes approach — his viewpoint character is not the star. He mostly observes and reports.

In *Brain Child*, Turner's setting is Victoria, and the year is 2047, when the world's soaring overpopulation has finally generated powerful laws to control it.

The viewpoint character is David Chance, twenty-five years old, brought up in an orphanage, beginning a career as a journalist. As the story opens, he receives a letter from a father he has never known, Arthur Hazard.

Hazard was one of a number of experimental children produced in the year 2002 by 'totally in vitro genetic manipulation', in a government-sponsored facility, established somewhere in western Victoria, known as The Nursery. The experiment has not been an unqualified success, with some of the super-children ending their lives in suicide. However, eight have survived to their present age of forty-five, and Arthur, when about twenty, had illegally coupled with a normal woman outside the group, siring David, whose mother had died following his birth.

David learns of his origins little by little. But Arthur Hazard — well, let him tell his story in his own words as he describes himself to David:

> '. . . for *Advanced Genetic Manipulation*, you can read *hit* or miss. . . . Induced hormone balances and gland secretions produced . . . nothing actually new, more like rarities that would normally breed out from normal population as sports, unintended variations born of the operators having no certainty of what they were about . . . no sensible appreciation of the millions of side-effect combinations possible to even the smallest interference with multiple-gene expression. . . .'

As the book proceeds, you discover there were three different types of Nursery Children, each a quartet of two males and two females. They are brilliant, pragmatic, ruthless, each type displaying different abilities.

The other characters, attempting to make sense of the super-children, are sharply drawn. For instance, there is Sam Armstrong, a politician who

> . . . had risen from the shop floor through union ranks to parliament and power [with] a rasping, crowd-haranguing high tenor with the flat, open vowels of the Australia of his

> youth — the voice of a demagogue who spoke to his people (privately, 'the rabble') in a workingman's tone and idiom: *I'm one of you; would I sell you short?* He had another voice, the voice of an educated man who spoke on equal terms with peers and presidents. . . . In either voice, he could make plain: *I matter; you don't.*

Armstrong is ninety-four, looks sixty — 'the age at which "Honour" had descended on his metabolism' — and paranoid, with 'an unsleeping suspicion of intent to rob him of his stolen life'.

To list all the characters, all of them vividly believable, would give away too much of the story, which keeps up tension throughout as it peels away layer after layer of its complexity. The scene, late in the book, in which David is hypnotized by the woman artist Belinda, one of the other experimental people, haunts you with its subtle horror.

Several times, as you read the book, you feel that you can predict where the narrative is leading. Then a door opens on another vista of a reality that shows you that what you have read so far is only a surface covering unexpected depths.

Complex, subtle, credible — *Brain Child* is a book you'll remember. I look forward to more of George Turner's bright spotlights illuminating his well thought-out future world.

IRRITATIONS AND INCONSISTENCIES

Greg Hills reviews

RATS AND GARGOYLES
by Mary Gentle

Corgi 0 552 13627 1; pb; 1991; 510 pp; A$10.95

Take a world in which alchemy works. Let thirty-six all-powerful gods take up fleshly ('rocky'? 'stony'?) residence there. Build a city around their dwelling, a city so large that it takes a ship three days to sail from the heads to the quays of its river. Place a nobility of intelligent, anthropoid rats over the human populace.

This, very briefly and in oversimplified detail, is the setting for this long novel.

My reaction to the book is a mixture of annoyance and delight. In order to create a background, Gentle has glossed over many inconvenient details. How does this enormous city keep itself going, since the medieval society it hosts displays none of the infrastructure required to get food and other perishable goods into its heart (and wastes out) in sufficient quantity and sufficiently quickly to stave off starvation and pestilence? The history of the city and the world in which it is set is very fuzzy.

There are also inconsistencies (inevitable in a novel this long, but irritating when stumbled across) in plot and characterization. Of the 'Acolytes' (aka 'daemons' and 'gargoyles', the last being the most descriptive term) a god says: 'They are only animals . . . Except in the darkness behind the eye and in the Fane, they have no voice'; yet earlier in the book, they tortured a priest 'for their own pleasure . . . I allow the acolytes their play'. A minor defect, introduced mainly to highlight the difference that the granting of 'speech and souls' has upon the 'animals', but illustrative of the way in which Gentle works.

In fact, the book is nowhere free to develop logically. At every turn the author stands, guiding events in the direction she has decided they should go rather than the direction suggested by the internal development of the story. This results in perpetual novelty — a surprise on every page — and perpetual confusion, since it is difficult to anticipate authorial interventions. If Gentle's gods are impulsive and whimsical, they are no more than the reflection of their creator.

But the book has more to offer than irritations. It is a rich and fascinating tapestry, a shadowy weaving of the was and the might-have-been. Here and there are reproduced pages from famous books of alchemy, adding verisimilitude to the mix. As I read I had the perpetual feeling of things happening just beyond the grasp of my knowledge — a sense that despite the whimsy and the heavy authorial hand, I was reading a true tale from some alternate world where God threw cocked dice and science as we know it could never develop.

'Tapestry' is a word I used advisedly. This book belongs firmly to the sub-genre of subcreations carved out by Gene Wolfe in 'The Book of the New Sun' and other novels, and by Brian Aldiss in *The Malacia Tapestry*. The latter, in fact, is the book that *Rats and Gargoyles* most strongly brings to mind. The cover features effusive praise from Michael Moorcock, which is not surprising as Moorcock has also delved extensively into this area in his more recent works. This is not to say that *Rats and Gargoyles* is derivative, for it is not; but if you have read and enjoyed any of the works mentioned in this paragraph you will quite probably enjoy this book as well.

MAN WITH A MISSION

Greg Hills reviews

BERSERKER: BLUE DEATH
by Fred Saberhagen

Tor 0 812 55329 2; pb; 1987; 282 pp.; US$3.50

Take a bright nebula, big enough to hold several stars. Add spacegoing humans, interested in 'mining' the nebula for its relatively densely packed organic and other spaceborne riches. Add killer machines, left over from an ancient alien grudge match. This is the background for this book.

The nebula is called 'the Milkpail'. The central character, Niles Domingo, is Mayor of one of the human colonies in the Milkpail. His unwitting opponent is a Berserker machine known (by humans) as 'Leviathan', distinguishble by the mysterious blue light it emits.

Levithan has been hanging around the human colonies in the Milkpail for years, destroying those that it finds insufficiently defended. Now it is the turn of Domingo's colony on the asteroid world of Shubra. While Shubra's defence fleet is away answering a call from a neighbouring colony, Leviathan takes the opportunity to ravage Shubra. Everyone on the asteroid is killed, including Domingo's beloved daughter. Domingo vows vengeance. With his ship the *Sirian Pearl* and a small picked crew, he sets out to track down and destroy the Berserker.

The story covers many light years of distance and involves many characters, including an alien Carmpan known as 'fourth Adventurer', who sees in the wandering *Pearl* a convenient platform from which he can attempt to contact mysterious intelligences born from the flux of the Milkpail.

The book is interesting, but suffers somewhat from its obvious reference to *Moby Dick*. Nor is the characterization what it might be; individuals sometimes act out of character, according to the immediate needs of the story. Hence a crewmate who has nursed Domingo through a difficult convalescence, who is aware of his preoccupation with the Berserker and who has accepted that and has an unspoken agenda that includes weaning him from what seems like a pointless chase, simply gives up after Domingo is unexpectedly indifferent to her dancing. She has become surplus to the plot, which now speeds up and leaves romance behind.

Berserker: Blue Death is only incidentally a Berserker book. Which is to say that while it features Berserkers centrally, it is not an integral part of the series and does not significantly advance our perceptions of Berserkers. It actually belongs to a much larger sub-genre of sf books that includes Mike Resnick's *Santiago* and Morressey's *Ironbrand* — Men With Missions, facing up to the worst that the universe can throw up at them, and winning, science fiction's version of Conan the Barbarian.

The books is self-contained, and you will not need to read other Berserker books to understand what is going on. An enjoyable adventure story.

EXPLORING A PHRASE

Greg Hills reviews

THE ETERNAL ENEMY
by Michael Berlyn

Morrow 1 88795 963 3; 1990; 323 pp.; US$22.95

How do you stop a column of driver ants?

You can burn them, but you risk destroying a lot of perfectly good jungle in the process. You can block their line of advance, buty they may simply swerve around your barrier. The best solution is to stop them breeding early enough that they never form the column.

There. I've done it. You now have the resolution of the book's plot. All you need to do now is read the book to understand the problem.

The Eternal Enemy is irritating in many ways, delightful and challenging in others. It is irritating in the rather crude way Berlyn moves his props and actors around to set up the situation. *How convenient* that the 'best' person to captain a voyage of interstellar investigation is a 'cured' psychopath. *How convenient* that the one person aboard the ship who can meet the 'Habers' on their own ground happens to fall afoul of the captain and runs away to crash into a convenient boulder, killing himself so that the Habers can bring him back, remade in their preferred image. This is the way the story runs, coincidence piled on convenience until plausibility is a hollow echo of laughter.

But let's look the other way. In this book we have two intelligent alien races who represent absolutes in their particular areas: the Habers, absolute pacifists; the Hydrans, absolute expansionists. The Habers have no concept of war and a limited grasp of aggression. They are supreme molecular biologists. The Hydrans too apparently have concept of 'war'; unending struggle is their way of life, an unyielding drive to expand and populate all the available land.

The twist is the presence of humans in the story, providing an interesting resonance to the book's title — which of the three races is the true Eternal Enemy, or does the concept exist on a more personal level, within the mores and habits of the societies and individuals comprising them? This is where the book's interest lies, as Berlyn explores the many ways in which the phrase 'the eternal enemy' can be interpreted.

On the shallowest level, the 'eternal enemy' is the Hydrans. Left alone, they will expand further and further into space, attempting to kill every other form of intelligent life they meet — not out of hate but because they occupy land the Hydrans can use to breed more Hydrans.

Look a bit deeper and you see that the 'ultimate enemy' is the Habers, who create first the instrument for investigating the nature of their enemy and then the means of implementing the solution to the problem that the instrument finds. For if they can do that to the Hydrans, what hope for humanity if ever we become a similar threat to the Habers?

'Their basic life-molecule was simpler, less complex, than DNA and trivial compared to the Haber molecule' (p. 252). Just what relevance the complexity of their genetic material has to the relationship between the species is not actually discussed, beyond the implication that the Habers are superior to both Hydrans and humans.

Look deeper again, and the 'ultimate enemy' is humanity, the ultimate predator, which even the Habers must use in order to defend themselves from 'the change' brought by the Hydrans.

Shift sideways from the racial to the personal, and the composition of the crew of the human starship *Paladin* suddenly clicks, at least in the sense that they are a weird mixture of psychological types brought together in defiance of realism so that Berlyn can examine 'the ultimate enemy' from new and unexpected directions. Is 'the ultimate enemy' some aspect of human nature, or is humanity its own 'ultimate enemy'? If so, what of the Habers, who in order to contain the Hydran menace have created changes in their own species that may never be completely reversed — becoming that which they attempted to stop?

This extended exploration of the nuances of an apparently simple, striking phrase provides the book with unusual power and applicability, overcoming its other shortcomings. Amidst the current wash of froth and bubbles, open-ended fantasy series and space opera, this book is a rock. As such, it is probably fated to sink, unappreciated and unnoticed.

ROBOT TURKEY

Greg Hills reviews

WULFSYARN: A MOSAIC
by Phillip Mann

Gollancz 0 575 04767 4; 1990; 287 pp.; £13.95/A$42

It is not often that I must admit defeat, but here it is: I was unable to finish this book. In fact, I was barely able to force myself to skim the later passages to avoid utterly disgracing myself. The problem is that I grew so bored in the reading that willy nilly I would find my attention wandering.

It's hard to pin down exactly what is wrong with the book, for it is clearly and readably written, with an interesting conundrum and some strong characters. I would say, having given the matter some months of consideration, that the choice of a

tediously pedantic scribing robot as narrator is a key piece of the problem. The robot, Wulf, has a well-drawn personality, but one that is so bland, neutral and uninteresting that he/she/it (pick your pronoun) is unable to carry the story to the reader. Wulf's interests and views are those of an 'academic', and I at least cannot identify with them.

The story: Wulf is a scribe-robot (an 'autoscribe') of great antiquity on the world Tallin. In a garden in Tallin, Jon Wilberfoss, one-time captain of the faster-than-light ship *Nightingale*, is putting his head together, with Wulf there to record the process and events.

> Wulf is struck by two facts:
>
> 1) Wilberfoss's entire account of his life is discussed in terms of his sexuality.
>
> 2) In his dealings with Medoc he did not trust the wisdom of his sexuality.
>
> What is one to make of that?
>
> (Chapter 6, page 69, 'Wulf's Brief Theory of Humanity')

The above quote leads into a 2.5-page lecture 'as far as Wulf is concerned'. This sort of thing happens far too often for the book to carry the reader with its action, and far too rarely to carry the reader with its ideas.

I hate to give a downcheck to a New Zealand writer (even if he was born a Pom) but there you have it: this book, at least, is a turkey.

NOT JUST ANOTHER FANTASY TRILOGY

Rosyln Gross reviews

THE FIONAVAR TAPESTRY by Guy Gavriel Kay:

THE SUMMER TREE (Unwin Paperbacks, 1986, 323 pp.)

THE WANDERING FIRE (Unwin Paperbacks, 1987, 298 pp.)

THE DARKEST ROAD (Unwin Paperbacks, 1988, 420 pp.)

It would be understandable to expect the worst from this set of novels. First, it is yet another fantasy trilogy; second, it contains, as does so much high fantasy, echoes of Celtic and Nordic mythology. In it we find several motifs and creatures familiar to readers of fantasy: dwarfs, mages, wolves (as evil creatures), beautiful elf-like beings and evil beings (svar alfar, which appeared, by the way, back in 1966 in Alan Garner's *The Weirdstone of Brisingamen).* We even find, starting with the second book, an unfolding of the Arthurian legend entwined with the plot. At the beginning of each of the books there is a map of Fionavar and a list of characters, features that at first made me dread that I was about to receive yet another dose of epic fantasy imitation.

I was very much mistaken. In this trilogy Kay has done something completely different. For a start, the various familiar fantasy motifs are only a small part of a complex and vividly imagined world, and do not simply represent stock responses and stereotypes as they so often do. For instance, the evil 'wolflord' turns out to be a much more complex and redeemable character than might be imagined at first. Things and people are not always what they seem here. Guy has also vividly portrayed original creatures and beings of his own, such as a particularly repulsive black swan, gods and goddesses, forest and water powers, a clan of pacifist giants, and many others. More important, however, is that this trilogy has qualities that make it moving and engaging.

Five seemingly ordinary young people from our world — Kim, Jennifer, Dave, Paul and Kevin — are invited by Loren, a mage from Fionavar, and Matt Soren, a dwarf who is also the source of his magic, to 'cross' to Fionavar to take part in the celebrations of the fiftieth anniversary of the High King. They are told that a thousand years earlier the evil god, Rakoth the Unraveller, was defeated and imprisoned beneath a mountain. Not long after their arrival, the evil god breaks free — one of the few predictable events in the trilogy. The five quickly become involved in the struggle against the Unraveller, and their fates become inextricably linked with the fate of the whole of Fionavar, and, indeed, of all the worlds, since Fionavar is the prime creation of which all the other worlds are imperfect copies. (This idea sits a little uneasily with me: although elements from other cultures do appear, Fionavar has too Celtic a feel to be the most fundamental of worlds.)

The need to defeat an evil power is a common enough plot device in fantasy writing. This is not, however, a routine quest tale. Not wishing to give too much away of the surprisingly fresh and unpredictable plot, I will only say that yes, the Unraveller is defeated in the end; but while in other hands this basic plot line could have ended up as just another dull rehash, here it becomes a vehicle for the unfolding of an immensely satisfying and deeply felt tale.

For such a trilogy, the characterization is unusually profound and complex. In Fionavar each of the visitors is burdened with a particular role in the struggle against the Unraveller; and in each case, the role, and the power that comes with it, are wedded in a profound way to the psychology and life story of the character. Paul, for instance, is enduring an unexpressed grief and guilt at the beginning of the story: his girlfriend, Rachel, has been killed in an accident in the very car Paul was driving just minutes after she told him she was to marry someone else. In Fionavar, Paul offers himself as a sacrifice on the Summer Tree to the god Mornir. Hanging on the Summer Tree, Paul is able to face up to and resolve the experience. Instead of dying, Paul lives, and becomes 'Pwill Twiceborn' (because he has been virtually reborn), and an agent of Mornir, with powers that gradually become manifest as the story unfolds. Through his suffering on the Tree, Paul is transformed into something more than himself. By the end of the story, all the visitors have also been deeply transformed, and in each case the new self is essential for the resolution of the plot.

As this vast pattern unfolds, Kay evokes profound emotions — joy, grief, awe — in a way that touches and transforms the reader as well as the characters. There are scenes in this trilogy that are unforgettable — an achievement unusual in a genre cluttered with mediocrity and clichés.

Nor are the emotions in the story cheaply bought. When the Dwarfs had made the sword Lokdal centuries before, it had been given with these words: 'Double-edged the knife, and double-edged the gift.' The words aptly describe the quality of events and emotions in the trilogy. Powers bestowed upon the characters bring burdens and griefs; joyous events inevitably involve pain, and vice versa. We see this most clearly in Kim, who in Fionavar becomes the new Seer, with a ring that has the power to bring aid for the coming war. But this power brings a dread-

ful burden and intense pain for Kim, over and over again.

> It might seem as if the stone were compelling her, but she knew that was not truly so. It was responding — to need, to war, to the half-glimpsed intuitions of her dreams — but it needed her will to unleash its power. So she shouldered the weight, accepted the price of power. . . .
>
> (*The Darkest Road*, pp. 69–70)

For everyone involved in the struggle, painful growth of one kind or another is inevitable, but the changes also bring new life and joy. We see this in Dave, a rather bitter and awkward man before his experiences in Fionavar, who finds a deep sense of community and healing among the Dalrei, tribal people who live on the Plain; and in Jaelle, High Priestess of the Goddess, an even more bitter and cold woman who slowly gives up her hatred and becomes capable of love. And one of the most moving events in the trilogy is the wholly surprising and wonderful act of Kevin, an act of self-sacrifice that is also the fulfilment of years of longing. His act brings springtime and healing to winter-bound Fionavar; death brings new life and hope. By the end, several characters we have come to really care about have died. A heavy price has been paid for the final joy, but we feel the rightness of this: the Tapestry involves light and darkness, life and death.

The trilogy employs the old theme of Light versus Darkness, and it is true that Rakoth the Unraveller is wholly and irredeemably evil. But this is not a world of blacks and whites. The double-edged quality is too pervasive. The characters are truly human, a mixture of good and bad. Moreover, Kay's conception of Fionovar, and of all the worlds, is essentially a pluralistic rather than a monistic one. Fionovar and the worlds teem with a myriad of powers and creatures, and all have their place in the tapestry that was created by the Weaver, who also randomness to enter the Tapestry to make free will possible. There is a sense of interweaving fates and patterns of events, made possible, paradoxically, by a random quality symbolized by the amoral wildness of Owein's Hunt, a power that nearly destroys Fionovar after first saving it.

In the end, the Unraveller is brought down, not by the army of the Light, nor by any of the five visitors, but by the act of a particular character who is himself a mixture of Light and Darkness, an heir to both, and again, through an act of self-sacrifice. Ursula Le Guin, in *A Wizard of Earthsea*, has Ged face his own shadow and accept it as part of himself. While Guy's solution is not quite as psychologically subtle as this, it is nevertheless an attempt to unite the opposites, Light and Darkness, and to avoid the goodies-versus-baddies position.

For me this trilogy is essentially an intense emotional experience, not an intellectual one. It does not seem to mainly a work of ideas or philosophy; and yet it does bring up and explore various issues: the nature of evil, of love, of free choice, and, as we have seen, makes some subtle and deeply felt statements about these things. More importantly, there is a deliberate underlying mythic dimension to these books. It is clear, for instance, that in the fates of both Paul and Kevin, Kay is evoking variations on the very ancient dying god myth, seen in Christianity as well as pre-Christian religions, in which a god dies and is either reborn or his death brings new life. Although neither Paul nor Kevin is a god, the theme here is the same: the necessity for sacrifice in order for new life to occur. Then there is the tension, the conflict, between the feminine and masculine principles, and finally, their ultimate union, all symbolized in the relationship between Paul, the representative of the masculine god Mornir, and Jaelle, High Priestess of the Goddess. In this way, Kay evokes a subtle yet coherent view of reality without foisting upon the reader all his own pet opinions and ideas, as some writers — fantasy or otherwise — tend to do.

Kay writes in an idiosyncratic style that startles, delights, and evokes strong responses, but occasionally its quirkiness is slightly grating. While one of his strengths is his ability to combine an epic, high fantasy feel with a modern, psychological approach, sometimes he irritates. For instance:

> 'The gods grant he be always bound,' Levon had said, only yesterday.
>
> No dice, it seemed.
>
> (*The Summer Tree*., p. 255)

To my ears, the modern colloquial 'No dice' here sounds quite out of place.

Out of context, other passages look over-embellished or even pretentious:

> . . . she cast her mind, her soul, to its farthest, most impossible compassing. Oh far, and there was so much Dark between, so much hate, and oh, so very great a power in Starkadh to stay her.
>
> (*The Summer Tree*, p. 322)

but in context this actually works very powerfully.

The Arthurian element, which has been done to death in fantasy writing, appears here quite unexpectedly and in an original way, but the characters involved suffer somewhat from being too perfect, even though they evoke our sympathy and wonder. Once we discover who Jennifer really is, she seems to lose her human dimension and become so much a figure of myth that it becomes difficult to empathize with her. More accurately, we empathize with the mythical character she becomes, but somewhere along the way the real Jennifer becomes lost.

It cannot be denied that there are derivative elements in this trilogy, but which piece of writing does not employ older symbols and traditions? Indeed, it is often precisely these that enrich and deepen an original piece of work. This is the case here. It is not just that Kay employs the derived elements in an original way. The originality of the trilogy lies in two things: the mainly successful merging of the high fantasy elements with a modern, vernacular feel that includes complex characterization; and Kay's own vivid, intense style that makes characters and emotions truly live.

I don't know much about **SCOTT CAMPBELL** except that he is connected to the Department of Philosophy at the University of Tasmania, and that he moves house a lot. Also he seems imbued with the spirit of the 1980s, which is perhaps why I disagree with most of his reviews (especially the following), but enjoy reading them.

No more Mr Nice Guy

by Scott Campbell

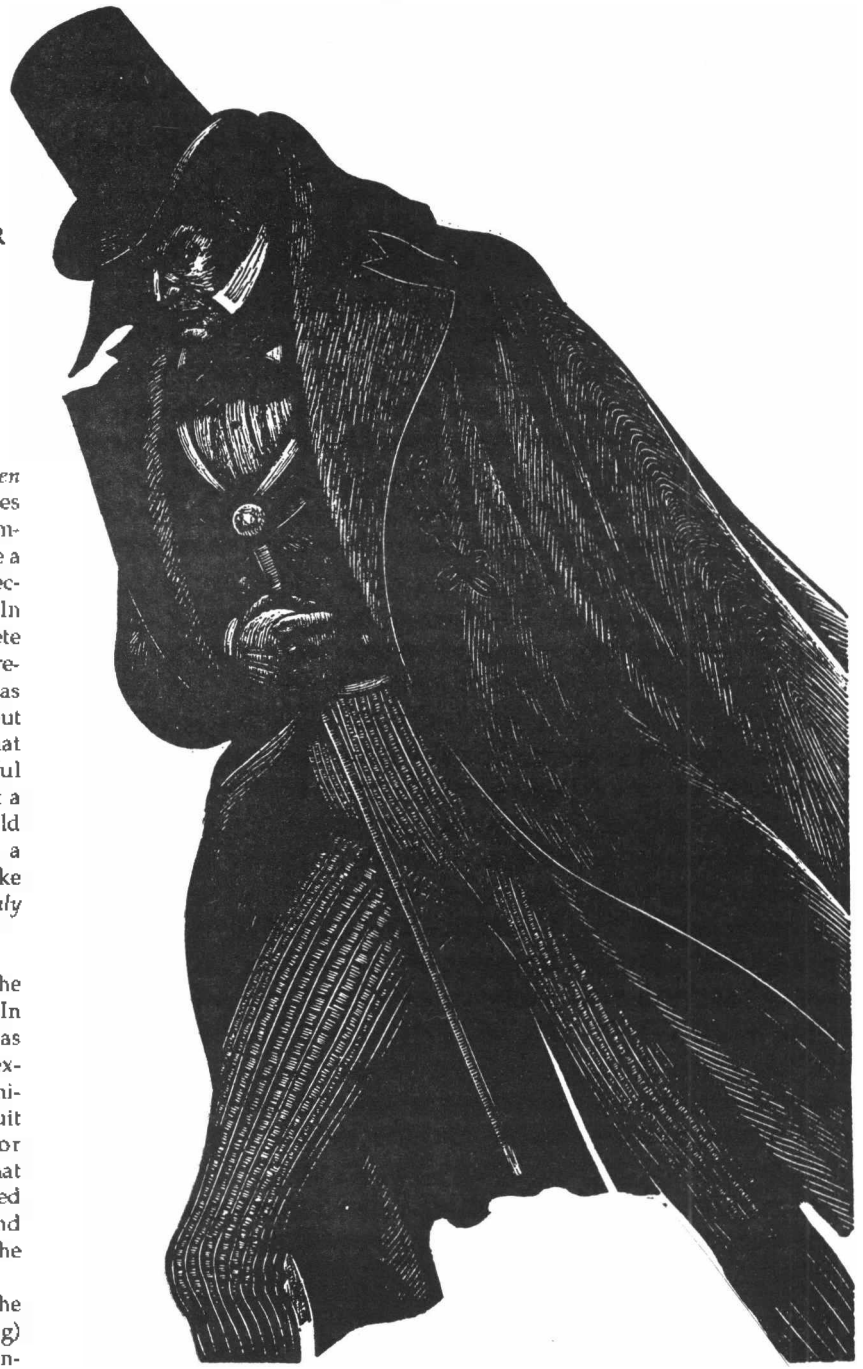
THE CONTINENT OF LIES
by James Morrow

Holt Rinehart Winston; 1984
Gollancz 0 575 03659 1; 1985;
274 pp.; £9.95

ONLY BEGOTTEN DAUGHTER
by James Morrow

Ace 0 441 63041 3; July 1991;
312 pp.; US$4.50

Morrow 0 688 05284 3; 1990;
312 pp.; US$19.95/A$28.50



With the publication of *Only Begotten Daughter*, James Morrow assumes the title of biggest wimp in contemporary sf. I suspected he would be a future contender when I read his second book *The Continent of Lies*. In itself this was too lame to compete with a more competent (and therefore more despicable) work such as Bruce Sterling's *Islands in the Net*, but I felt it presaged a *magnum opus* that would stretch Morrow's cheerful mediocrity to such an extent that a truly God-awful work of art would be (unmiraculously) conceived, a work that a more careful writer like Sterling could never produce. *Only Begotten Daughter* is that work.

But first a few comments about the earlier work *The Continent of Lies*. In the distant future, biotechnology has developed so that any imagined experience can be recorded electronically. The seed of a special fruit called the cephapple (or 'dreambean') can be designed so that when it is devoured, the imagined experience is replicated in the mind of the eater. (Why didn't KFC get the franchise?)

As you'd expect, this leads to the old familiar (but very interesting) stuff about the problems of distin-

guishing fantasy and reality, though Morrow is far inferior at this game than a master like Philip Dick. Morrow's intentions are also different from Dick's. Through his narrator, Morrow makes it clear that he knows what reality is, and when all is said and done and kicked in the ass there is going to be no confusion between reality and illusion, despite the inevitable cephapple-trip-that-seems-so-real scenes.

Which is better — the book that leaves us with varying degrees of doubt about whether we can tell reality from illusion, or the book that reaffirms our ability to tell the difference? I prefer the first sort; I don't like books that are confident about the answers to difficult questions. But I realize that there may be good reasons for writers to prefer the second. Morrow isn't interested so much in abstruse metaphysics as in what is socially relevant.

What did annoy me was the review of this book by Span Hanna in *Science Fiction* No. 29. He or she professed to be glad that this wasn't one of those 'dream-within-a-dream' stories, or a 'reality forever changed, forever impossible to pin down' story. What the hell is wrong with such a story, apart from the obvious point that it can be overdone, or badly done? If one prefers Morrow's sort of story, that's fair enough, but a reviewer can hardly talk as if the other sort of story is intrinsically unimaginative and intellectually jejune (although some of the writers of such stories may be).

There were other faults in *The Continent of Lies*. The action and adventure elements are unconvincing (even as the satire they're supposed to be), and the plot is handled badly in the second half. The characters all seem exactly like people today, and society also seems to have changed little, although many thousands of years have passed. Perhaps Morrow believes that people don't really change much at heart, but certainly they would not be exactly the same sort of people as those who exist today. The idea might have been to emphasize the relevance of the story's allegory, but the story isn't funny enough for that to work.

The Continent of Lies is not all bad, by any means. I enjoyed the psychologically scarring dreambean experience around which the plot revolves, and which is the reason for banning dreambeans at the end, but I expected something more, given the potential for literary inventiveness offered by such a device. Can you imagine the amazing experiences you could have with a dreambean?

My main objection to *The Continent of Lies* is the implied moral allegory behind the tale. In the end dreambeans must be banned. Despite some regrets, Morrow obviously thinks this is the best thing to do with them. He thinks that humans just can't be trusted with some technologies. Like most 1980s American liberals, at heart he's a family man, and it's the danger the cephapple presents to the family that makes the difference, even it it's to a modern single-parent family. Despite the surface differences, this is the 1950s all over again.

I don't agree with Russell Blackford who, in his review of Bob Shaw (*ASFR* Second Series, No. 23, pp. 14–15) claims (in effect) that reaffirming 1950s-style values is intrinsically bad no-correspondence-entered-into. (Blackford also wonders about how much an advance on mainstream fiction sf can be when it is just an excuse for 'inscrib[ing] present-day crypto-ideology large on the Universe'. I strongly agree with him here, but we must remember that for some sf and mainstream authors, sf techniques are simply alternative and (perhaps) better ways of making points about today's world. And if you have a brilliant example of this idea in print, such as Martin Amis's *Dead Babies*, it's difficult to argue against it.)

I simply disagree with Morrow over his values. I don't know where we can get any objective standard to say who is right, who is 'politically correct'. One thing we can do to put people off a value system is to show that the system does not meet some desired criteria — that is, for example, hypocritical or inconsistent. But few systems pass muster on these counts. Who sets the criteria by which we evaluate different systems?

I don't like the evasiveness of modern liberals such as Morrow, who don't come out and say what they really believe in, but hide behind equivocal and suggestive language ('have a rethink on where we're going' is a real chestnut).

Morrow's dreambean industry is almost exactly like the current American film and tv industry. Given this (and assuming that he doesn't want to ban film and tv altogether), it seems that he is advocating censorship or, as he would probably put it, 'a rethink on what we're doing with our current media technology'. As it's very hard to stop people watching the things you don't like, any 'rethink' usually ends up as a disguised call for censorship.

Maybe Morrow is right here. I don't have the space to debate the issue now, so I simply state that I am totally against Morrow's ideas, and despise the wimpy little 'New Age liberals' (most of whom, like Richard Neville, have become the very censors they fought against in the 1960s).

I could point out that silly Plato did not want poets and playwrights in the perfect society because people would be unable to tell the difference between reality and the events on the stage, and how the same was said by other peckerheads about tv, but I won't, because I agree that there is a possibility that virtual reality, for example, could progress to the point where reality and virtual reality are indistinguishable. Nothing wrong with this in itself, but it does provide potential for all sorts of terrible things to happen. But hey, it's worth the risk.

Much less needs to be said about *Only Begotten Daughter*, Morrow's tale of the Second Coming of Christ, who is of course female (though not black), as is God Herself. It's simply inept and unimaginative. You wouldn't believe it reading the reviews of Morrow's work from all sorts of distinguished reviewers on the front cover, back cover, first, second and third, and one of the inside back pages of the American paperback edition. I can only compare it the film *Jesus of Montreal*. If you liked such an obvious and hamfisted work, then you'll probably like *Only Begotten Daughter*.

There is just so much scope for retelling the life of Jesus. I think the whole idea of the retelling is an unoriginal waste of time unless you are going to do something with it, such as Ballard's inspired work in *The Atrocity Exhibition*, 'Zodiac 2000', *The Unlimited Dream Company* and 'The Object of the Attack'.

Some of the reviewers have compared Morrow to Lenny Bruce and Kurt Vonnegut, and this is apt. A lot of Bruce's religious satire was relevant and devastating in its day but, having done its work, it has become commonplace. Yet many of Morrow's jibes recycle Lenny Bruce's most outdated material. His more up-to-date satire is simply limp. (The same could be said of the Vonnegut influence.)

Morrow's main characters seem to be the same as you'd find in any

standard American Sterling-sucked cyberwimp book, except that Morrow draws his characters in a more light-hearted way. They're basically ideologically sound, but a bit rough around the edges, with a few idiosyncrasies and character failings that just make them all the more human and lovable. If you actually met anybody like this you'd want to strangle them.

Morrow ends the book with the daring and provocative suggestion that the character of Amanda the Sea Sponge is really God. This is because sponges are 'faceless, shapeless, holey, undifferentiated, Jewish [sic], inscrutable . . . and a hermaphrodite to boot . . . cannot be fatally dismembered, for each part quickly becomes the whole . . . both immortal and infinite'. Get it? Saying that God is a sponge is saying that our concept of God can 'soak up' whatever we want God to be. What an original idea!

However easy and feeble Morrow's targets may seem, it's still good to see someone going for religion these days (did you hear a noise outside, Salman?). Religion took such a battering in the 1960s and 1970s that it's now considered bad form in many quarters to sink the boot in again. Unfortunately religion is making a comeback on two fronts: the low-brow (exemplified by the US televangelists) and, just as dangerously, the intellectual.

While organized religion still has some measure of intellectual approval, the more dangerous low-brow religious forces can feed with ease on the souls of the cretinous. This is why I get annoyed when I see the tv stations, and the ABC in particular, seriously present the views of the Church on moral issues such as abortion. If we don't take the Church seriously on matters of fact, why consult its representatives on matters of value, when all their values are based on the factual beliefs?

GLASS REPTILE BREAKOUT AND OTHER AUSTRALIAN SPECULATIVE STORIES
edited by Van Ikin

Centre for Studies in Australian Literature, University of Western Australia;
1990; 161 pp.; A$14.95

It's tricky reviewing a collection of Australian short stories, especially when you don't want the local fans and writers to think you're nothing but a misanthropic, terminally sarcastic and arrogant prick spouting nothing but hate-filled bile. Especially when you think that a highly intelligent editor like Van Ikin does a fantastic job promoting Australian sf by putting out anthologies and *Science Fiction* magazine as well as writing his own fiction (and it was Van to whom I first wrote for information about the Australian sf scene, and he was very helpful).

But I must admit that I didn't much like *Glass Reptile Breakout*. This is not overly surprising, because I'm not a great fan of the bulk of Australian sf, though I've kept up with most of it in recent years. (I'm not saying that Oz sf doesn't rank on the world stage, though.) Anyone who is more sympathetic and wishes to write an alternative review should feel free to do so. (I'd even send her or him the book if I could sure that such a person would actually write anything.)

Most of the authors here are very capable. It's the choice of stories that disappointed me, though I suppose with Damien Broderick you could hardly go right. This man is one of the most talented and intelligent writers in the country (perhaps too intelligent for his own good), and much of what he says I like, yet most of the stories of his that I've read are a waste of time not only for the reader but, I suspect, for the writer (and I also suspect I'm going to be pilloried by Broderick for this). 'All My Yesterdays' isn't worthy material to be dredged up from 1964 and reworked by an author with a PhD in the semiotics of scientific and literary discourse. ('A Tooth for Every Child', however, the only story of his that I've liked, is the perfect story for an sf writer who has delved, perhaps too deeply and seriously, into arcane literary theory.)

Too many of the efforts are inconsequential. To name a few names: Stephen Dedman's 'Errand of Mercy', Leanne Frahm's 'The Supramarket', Sue Isle's 'The Last Guardian', Petrina Smith's 'In the Garden', and Jack Wodhams's 'Mostly meantime'. Some of these writers have shown elsewhere that they can write. Some haven't.

I thought that Paul Collins's 'The Getaway Star' and Van's own 'Combatant' didn't work too well. In saying this, I've probably prevented myself from ever being published in a Paul Collins or Van Ikin anthology. (Is honesty worth it, when I can't even be sure that my opinions are worth anything? But if reviewers can't say what they think, and must always consider everybody else's opinions and feelings, nothing of consequence would ever be written. Writers shouldn't be so touchy. Just say 'fuck the critic'. The critic may be right, but who's to say? If you want to reply, don't write a shrill, abusive letter. Write a considered, subtly abusive letter.)

Russell Blackford's title story has style, but he wastes it on a corny plot. Philippa Maddern's 'Confusion Day' should have been buried somewhere deep after it appeared in *Urban Fantasies* (good collection, that one, on the whole). Rosaleen Love tries to make some not very startling points about scepticism, credulity and the scientific attitude in 'The Sea-Serpent of Sandy Cape'. She affects such a gentle and understanding style that the story never rises above the inconsequential.

Lucy Sussex's 'The Lipton Village Society' has a refreshingly downbeat approach to the losers-who-secretly-live-in-an-alternative-world story. A pity the story idea contains not a skerrick of originality. Dressing it up in the sort of mediocre and clumsy kitchen-sink social realism that in certain Australian sf circles passes as high art can't hide such a screaming old cliché.

In 'Artifact', talented Greg Egan writes about a scientist who, having been there at the discovery of a mysterious artifact in space that promises to tell us much, gets jack of the whole thing and pisses off home before the investigations even start. Sounds like a good idea (the story, that is), and Egan tries hard to make the scientist's ennui convincing (and gives him a little dream at the end that perhaps reveals the function of the artifact). But the story completely fails. I was as bored as the scientist, and Egan is normally a writer who is most unboring. He should have tried again, or thrown this one in the garbage.

David J. Lake writes the sort of stories that others are afraid to. And afraid with good reason. In 'Omphalos: A Dialogue', it's hard to believe he's actually written a story (albeit a shorty) that is nothing more than the bare speculation about the possibility that we could be shifting into alternative universes all the time and not be aware of it ('It was still the same old world . . . Mozart's 42nd Symphony is my favourite.') I give the plot away (that's all there is) because we've all thought up this story ourselves when we were about ten years old. (We all thought up Philip K. Dick's tricks a few years later; the

difference is that Dick could still impress us with his use of these ideas.)

The better stories are mostly from the big names. Terry Dowling contributes another of his remarkable a'bo stories, 'Vanities'. Unfortunately, these leave me cold. I think Sean McMullen's 'The Colours of the Masters' is given a silly treatment, but McMullen still writes well enough to have an emotional effect. In 'Shut the Door When You Go Out', George Turner has written the classic Gaia story that is inevitable in this day and age, and though it's an okay piece, it's one of those stories that really makes you aware that sometimes a considered essay is better than an sf story. Like a lot of sf, its merit is mainly as a good starting point for discussion.

The only story that really soars is Simon Brown's 'Skyriders', although it has that great poetic poser of Australian sf, 'mind-singing', in it (nicely used, though). This was written in 1982; it's a shame that Brown hasn't been able to match it with his recent efforts.

One thing puzzles me about this collection. Why include stories that have recently been published in anthologies that have been as available as this one? Fair enough to reprint stuff that has appeared in hard-to-get anthologies, but why take stuff that has appeared in *Strange Attractors* and *Urban Fantasies*? (A story that has recently appeared in the writer's own anthology is a different matter, of course.)

(I was interested to see that the back cover notes that 'six authors are Western Australians'. I had thought that such ardent parochialism was confined to Tasmanians, until I heard from some people who have gone to live in WA that the favourite sport there is puffing up WA, closely followed by damning every idea that originates from outside WA as an 'Eastern plot'.)

I suspect this book has been edited with an eye to getting it onto senior high school English courses, because the selection has just this feel about it. They're the sort of stories that trendy English teachers would feel 'challenge the students' assumptions' (but not too much) (and not their own). Also, there are plenty of stimulating and not too difficult ideas for discussion. And I suppose this is admirable.

Stop press: Van's little note on page 161 confirms this suspicion, making the choice of selection much more understandable, although it hardly excuses the stories themselves.

THE TOTAL DEVOTION MACHINE AND OTHER STORIES
by Rosaleen Love

Women's Press 0 7043 4188 3; 1989; 165 pp.; £4.50/A$12.99

While the difficulties experienced in getting this book distributed in Australia are to be lamented, to be quite honest, nobody's missing much. It must be disappointing for the writer and those involved in the publication to have to put up with such a state of affairs, but the only disappointment for the rest of us is that someone who, based on two Ditmar nominations, promised to be a bright new talent, proves to be something rather more limp.

This is not to say that there won't be many who will take to the stories of Rosaleen Love. (This is already shown by the numbers of people who voted for her in the Ditmar Awards.) In fact, Love is just the writer for those caring-sharing, concerned-about-everything types who made the 1980s so balls-achingly tedious.

Now I don't wish this review to be merely a sarcastic snipe session, but the fact is that all of Love's stories, even those purportedly set in the future, are really set in the 1980s, with the aforementioned character types the principles. This is not because Love can't use her imagination to escape her era; it's rather that a large part of her intention is to write about her era. But the result is that her stories are just as boring as the decade they are written about.

In their own limp way, the stories satirize the 1980s, taking ineffective shots at such characters as I have mentioned, and the way some of these people twist eighties values for their own ends. This fact, I would have thought, is hardly a revelation, but apparently some readers have found such points insightful. The other villains of the decade, the thoughtless yuppies, also get a feeble serve.

Love's problem is that she lacks the strength and daring to pull the stories up by their bootstraps to achieve anything of note. Perhaps the problem is that, as George Turner sort of says on the back cover, Love is laughing with her characters, rather than at them. This reveals an inconsistency, because the impression I gained is that Love wants to laugh at her characters, but being a non-judgemental, caring type, she laughs with them. She does, on more than a few occasions, threaten to open out and come up with something that might stir the emotions, but always she dies away, falling back onto her timid, oops, subtle, over-careful style.

If done well, such a softly-softly approach can be more effective than any other style, but Love makes you feel that all the characters are sedated. Maybe this is a reflection of the fact that many people (except the greenies) are too scared to do or say anything these days for fear of being held 'ideologically unsound'. (Nearly all Love's characters are, when you get down to it, wimps.) But it defeats the purpose if the author is as lily-livered as her characters.

Ironically, on the few occasions when Love gets a bit frisky, the results are crude and obvious. The title story is a good example of this, as it leads up to its inevitable contrived ending.

'If You Go Down to the Park Today' is a much more ambitious and mature effort, but still suffers from the same cliched version of the world found in her other stories, particularly its view of science and its potential for harm. Considering that Love teaches History of Science, I would have expected more insight, and some novel approaches to the workings of science and its place in society, but this approach is straight from *Beyond 2000*.

'The Bottomless Pit' is probably the best attempt at satirical farce, with a humorous look at wherever on Earth (or elsewhere) it is that money goes. But the attempt at witty, flowing dialogue falls flat.

Love has the habit of oversimplifying matters, especially political and scientific, for humorous and satirical effect. Sometimes when writers do this, the matters are clarified, or else you feel that issues have been distorted unfairly but to good effect, either to make important points or to produce humorous effects. But with Love, the effect is akin to reading the lyrics of Midnight Oil (and not much funnier). The impression she gives is that she really believes in some of her oversimplifications.

I'm not saying that Love is any worse a writer than the average semi-pro Australian writer. She's certainly competent, and has a feel for her characters that many science fiction writers lack (or prefer, quite justifiably in some cases, to dispense

with), but her stories lack excitement and, more importantly, real imagination.

ISLANDS IN THE NET
by Bruce Sterling

Morrow 0 8779 952 8; 1988; 348 pp.; US$18.96

According to the jacket of this blurb-drenched book, Sterling, with this publication, takes his place in the front rank of the Cyberpunks, for which he is the leading spokesman. Great, I thought. This is the first Cyberpunk book I've read, and I expected something mind-blowing, something surreal and dangerous — that certain something.

Well, in the book there is, according to the dust jacket, a computer network called the Net. Aha, I thought, no doubt this is something akin to the Cyberspace that the appropriately titled Cyberpunks are always on about. Virtual reality, and all that sort of jazz you read about in computer magazines.

The book starts slowly. The Net seems initially a normal computer network, such as you would find in any university in 1990, with a few extras. No doubt something vastly more amazing will be revealed. But slowly it dawned on me; this was it. This was all it was, you average modern computer network. No Cyberspace. No artificial intelligences. No hacking adventures. Times must have moved faster than Sterling suspected. When he wrote this in the mid-1980s, such things must have seemed a hundred years away. Boy, do things move fast in the computer world.

But let's not be hasty. Sterling has some daring little technological innovations that you wouldn't believe in a pink fit. Check these out for size. Sun glasses that have cameras in them. Ceramic machetes that are real sharp. This is scary stuff! Drugs that make you feel good. Radical. Synthetic foods made from bacteria. Computer hackers who pirate the contents of data bases. Suntan oil that makes you black. The list is endless. And get this — Africa is becoming a vast desert, and people are starving in their millions. Bet that one gave you a kick in the pants, eh?

Okay, I'll quite with the smart-guy putdowns. After all, the novel is set only about forty years in the future, not 400. While Sterling doesn't have anything really amazing to report as far as gadgets go, he's not bad on setting up the political scene to come. Some of what he imagines isn't all that likely, given subsequent events (though some things may well come to be), but he does make a thorough job of it, and can, as some reviewers remark, see both sides of the important issues he examines. This seems to be a necessary requirement, rather than an unexpected virtue, maybe it's difficult to find such perspectives these days.

Islands in the Net, then, is not just a study of 'one woman's determination to save the free world'. It is also intended to speculate about the future political scene and how technology will affect us. As a futuristic political thriller-cum-extrapolation/examination, it has perhaps enough interest to keep some readers ploughing ahead, and the writing is certainly superior to that of your average run-of-the-mill political thriller.

However, many of Sterling's characters, rather than being changed radically by technology, are simply extensions of the now infamous (at least in this article) caring-sharing, reconstructed types that populate, in a more absurd form, Rosaleen Love's volume. But the older characters in Sterling's novel, who have grown up in the 1980s, seem more like seventies types; he describes them as self-centred, free-wheeling and independent. Perhaps he has yuppies in mind. Maybe he thinks that the time of the New Ager has not yet come, and will do so in the future. I hope not.

Sterling, like Love, takes some mild satiric jobs at such character types. They don't know what 'real violence' is, for example, having been brought up in their lovey-dovey environments, spending quality time with their families. The main character, Laura, is rudely brought down to Earth by an old British bully-boy officer, who tells her that the Falkland Islands War was real action, rather than the 'TV war' that apparently is all youg et in the future. But I suspect that Sterling himself lives in a world not far removed from that of his characters.

Like Rosaleen Love, Bruce Sterling at times threatens to do somethign exciting, and he comes up with the goods more often than she does. But he also dies away, back to his mundane description of the New Age marriage between Laura and David, wracked by desires for personal fulfilment and beset by feelings of responsibility on both sides. During the book, Laura ends up in ever more brutal places and starts to get an idea of how harsh reality can be (which, surprise surprise, either corresponds closely to that of the late twentieth-century world, or is a consequence of it). This is done in an entirely predictable fashion. There is nothing startling in what he writes about (secret submarines, prison camp for a year, African deserts with millions starving), so this descent into a future hell is not very thrilling.

In *Aurealis* 1, George Turner points out that we are on the verge of momentous changes, and he calls for sf writers to tackle the important issues of the near future. At first glance, this seems to be what Sterling has attempted. Ultimately, what Sterling gives us is something Turner derides: a world similar to our own, with more gadgets.

In one section Sterling uses a rather obvious ginnick to show the differences between the new breed and the old barbarians of the late twentieth century. He describes Laura being appalled, though fascinated, by old Space Invaders-type games, with their violence, slaughter, destruction and the inevitability of the computer always winning.

Sterling never lets on whether or not he agrees that the games are harmful and should perhaps be controlled or banned, as apparently happens in the future, or whether he thinks this is an over-reaction by future new sensitive types (who after all have had to change many things in order to prevent the nuclear holocaust). He does bring out the seductive effect of these games, with their attractive violence, but in true eighties spirit he is non-judgemental about the issue. Some might call this having it both ways.

My favourite scene in the book is when the smooth young Prime Minister of Singapore is drugged while appearing on a giant video screen, and he goes bananas. His monologue reveals Sterling's sicker side (and mine as well for liking it): 'Dogs fucked Vienna! Ladies and gentlemen, I . . . I'm afraid I'm sorry that the pariah dump-dogs fucked the Ayatollah! Lick my ass! You should shit on the Space Captain fucking laser launch —' This, however, is merely a grimace in the impressive and serene face of Sterling's prose.

One passage that rather amused me, in light of the fact that I had been expecting some amazing head trip through artificial reality, shows Laura feeling disorientated and rained after a long session on the Net. This futuristic 'toxic shock

syndrome' is the only demonstrated effect of the Net.

No wild extrapolation for Sterling. He's telling it the way it's going to be. I'm not averse to this sort of thing at all; in fact, I'm very interested in it. However, I'm not really interested in reading a 348-page novel if it's simply about one writer's methodical but uninspired vision of the near future, when I can get the same sort of thing from *New Scientist*. I don't want an essay. I've noted already that Sterling does not show many of the effects of technology on people and society in the book, and the characters, plot and execution don't succeed in holding the attention. The only thing that kept me reading, apart from the fact that I would be reviewing the book, was the question: 'What the hell is he going to do next with the stupid plot?'

Sterling is capable of good work; at times you feel that he can use words as well as any great sf writer. Sometimes he has an edge to his writing, and develops an individual style. But he needs more of these things. He needs more of an edge to his writing; he needs more style; he needs to be less doggedly realistic in drawing his characters. Maybe Sterling suffers from being too nice a guy to be a great writer. I'd bet that if Sterling went through some of what his characters went through he'd gain that bite, and maybe some real vision.

THE CYBERNETIC SOLUTION
by Victor Milan

Morrow 1 55710 003 9; 1990;
272 pp.; US$19.95

Milan treads similar ground to Sterling's, but without the skill and polish of the Texan. This novel can also be labelled 'cyberpunk', but in a low-key way. Milan prefers the normal human perspective to that of virtual reality. Even the two artificial intelligences who stand (if that's the right word) central to the action are essentially human. So Milan is also a future- looking humanist, the kind that might please George Turner, but he doesn't produce the goods any more effectively than Sterling does.

Milan's development of the main human character, the Japanese Nagaoka Hiroshi, seems overly contrived. He begins in charge of a space station, but he lacks the respect of his underlings, and is plagued with self-doubt. Eventually he wins the confidence of his crew, and starts to feel better about himself. This sounds corny, and some parts of the novel are, but in the main it is handled reasonably well, and avoids being tatty. But the overall impression is that Milan is just looking for a way to make his character more interesting, and he is not really interested in Nagaoka's development. Either that, or he's not a convincing writer.

Most of the other characters don't exactly jump out of the page at you. In fact, it comes as something of a surprise when you realize that these boring characters are supposed to be important.

We mainly get to know Musashi, one of the central Artificial Intelligences. She's a nice 'girl', learning all about reality and the human world, and she wants to do the right thing. Milan might well be correct in supposing that AIs will be like humans; if so, they will need to be more interesting than Jane Austen characters to capture the attention of readers.

In some passages, such as those describing the 'Reef', an artificial reality contained in the 'Net', Milan lets fly with the purple prose, showing that he has a good ear for elegant, glittering language. In the rest of the book, Milan keeps the technical references to a minimum, with the continual invocation of the term 'sub-routine' as a way of explaining strange events or characters that appear in the Reef. Turing's name is mentioned a few times; what irks me, however, are the occasional unnecessary references to modern sf authors.

Another irritant is his main female character, Nikki, an American. He tries very hard to make her fit the modern post-feminist image. She's sassy and smart, and talented and tough, and can mix it with the big boys, while remaining a fully rounded human being, fun, sexy and warm.

(This is much the same sort of thing that Sterling tries to achieve with his characters Laura and David. David, for example, is a caring-sharing responsible SNAG, but hey, he's still a regular guy, he still drinks beer with the boys, and he notices when a pretty girl passes by.)

Characters in novels should be interesting people, with plenty of faults, not role models.

The whole book gives me the impression that Milan hasn't put his soul into it, and has just gone through the motions of novel-writing. Not that he isn't heading in the right direction. He began with a pulpy series called 'War of the Powers', but is now raking in critical acclaim for these cybernetic books (the first was *The Cybernetic Samurai*). However, this new novel still seems perfunctory and predictable. Despite the many Japanese references, there is no effective sense of place; there are no insights into Japanese society or the Japanese mind.

All I can say, Victor Milan, is go tell it to the samurai.

SUGAR RAIN
by Paul Park

Morrow 1 55710 029 2; 1989;
384 pp.; US$19.95

With this book I broke one of my most sacred rules: 'Always finish reading a book that you start, especially if you are reviewing it.' *Sugar Rain* joins the dubious ranks of books I could not force myself to finish. It's nowhere near as bad as many I've read (Park is more than a competent writer), but *Sugar Rain* is so ponderous that finishing each page became a major effort. I don't propose to condemn a book of whose 384 pages I have read only 115, but I can certainly condemn the first 115 as being mind-numbing, with no indication that the book would get better.

(I gain the impression, partly from reading the blurbs, that Park is trying for the Salman Rushdie style of Islamic-influenced writing. It's unlikely that other writers in this field face much competition from Park.)

I think the idea of *Sugar Rain* is that it is supposed to hypnotize you. The Peter Carey books I've read (*War Crimes*, *Bliss*) had a hypnotic effect on me, with their seductive and elegant descriptive prose. Park's prose worked differently. I was not mesmerized. I did not find his prose 'strangely compelling' or 'flowing as in a dream'. If Park's style seduces you, you might like his book. If you smoke a lot of has, as some of Park's characters do, this book might entrance you.

.The sugar rain of the book's title really is sugar rain. It's also flammable and smells faintly of gasoline. It's a marvellous poetic invention which, like other powerful and effective images, seems full of a significance that you cannot quite describe. It's also about the only marvellous invention in the first 100 pages of the book. No wonder the author gives it top billing as the title of his story.

In the book, the city-state of Charn undergoes revolution, and the lovers Princess Charity

Starbridge (I kid you not) and Thanakar Starbridge are separated. Charity travels through some underworld. I will never know whether they get back together. If not, Park can always write the third volume of the Starbridge series, as no doubt he is doing right now.

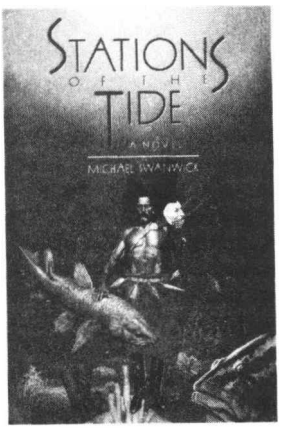
More volumes will also give new scope for writers of cover blurbs. I realize it's hard to sell books, but the books by Sterling, Milan and Park all have extravagant blurbs written by Roger Zelazny and many other sf writers. Is this what sf writers do in their spare time — sing each other's praises? There is nothing wrong with publishers telling the world that other writers and critics like the book, but the lavish praise, the grandiose claims, make me a bit suspicious, considering the okay-but-nothing-special nature of these books.

STATIONS OF THE TIDE
by Michael Swanwick

Morrow 0 688 10451 7; 1991;
252 pp.; US$19.95

Whereas James Morrow (see elsewhere in this issue for my review of his most recent book) is a writer to avoid, even if it means sacrificing a vital bodily organ or two, Michael Swanwick is one to look out for in the future. *Stations of the Tide* reveals a talented writer who has yet to hit his straps, but may well do so. Or he may not. Only She knows, but as Morrow insists on telling us, She's keeping mum. (Joseph Heller made much the same point in funnier and more poignant fashion in his own badly flawed God book, *God Knows*.)

Like many of these William Morrow review copies, the cover of *Stations of the Tide* is decorated with the sort of elegant, stylized review that is intended to be a miniature masterpiece in itself. While the book isn't as



good as the reviews proclaim ('A sinuous narrative, worldly and very agreeably perverse' says William Gibson), Swanwick almost is. His imagination is certainly fertile, though I wasn't as impressed by his planet Miranda. I felt that his best writing in the book was about the tech. He knows how much explanation to give and how much to take for granted. He convinces without having to explain much (though some knowledge of virtual reality and artificial intelligence is needed).

Swanwick has a great time with the rogue artificial intelligence 'Earth', who was the powerful Terran artificial intelligence who went crazy and killed everyone left on the planet. (Not necessarily an irrational act in itself, especially if you're an artificial intelligence, but as it happens it was crazy, or at least that's what they say.) Now, in a delightful cameo, the captured Earth appears in virtual reality as a huge, stinking, repulsive and whorish beast that could still run amok and create all sorts of havoc. (Surely Mr Swanwick isn't swine enough to suggest this as a metaphor for our nice old planet?) In order to get to the 'bottom' of Earth, you have to travel down her foul and revolting gullet.

The plot and characters are not as interesting as the main idea. The main character is called simply 'the bureaucrat', who is annoying and pretentious, especially as he isn't particularly bureaucratic by nature. If there is satire here, it's too subtle for detection. In fact, the whole book gives the impression of something of subtle but undetectable literary significance going on. I suspect there is nothing much beneath the surface of this book, which itself is deep and rich enough with allusions and insights. (There are references to *The Tempest*, but damned if I can see the parallels.)

The plot, while mildly interesting, is not particularly original, and the main characters are a bit of a bore. The minor characters are more fleshed out and eccentric, but are drawn in that pared-down, economical style of recent 'literary' sf writing, and they don't ring true. The major characters are all rather mysterious and emblematic. This would acceptable of these characters did interesting things, but these people don't. The story cries out for some richly detailed and flamboyant characters to make it come alive.

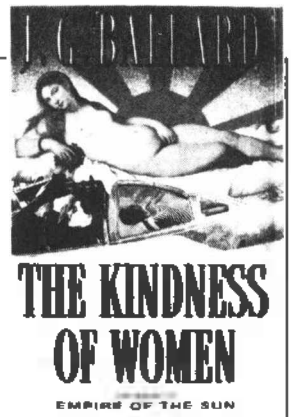
Swanwick writes with great control and expertise, but his style isn't suited to writing colourful, suspenseful adventures. There is certainly no 'disturbing and intense mood of menace and suspense', as the blurb proclaims. He could perhaps create such a mood effectively with a more suitable story; and urban virtual reality setting would perhaps be more his style.

But keep a lookout for this guy in the future, because he can use language well, and has a rich and clever imagination, and a taste for the bizarre. I think he'll write some of the best sf books of the nineties.

— **Scott Campbell,**
Department of Philosophy, University of Tasmania,
January 1991–January 1992

STEELE COLUMN

by Colin Steele



(These reviews have been written for the *Canberra Times* between late 1990 and March 1992.)

Ursula Le Guin: TEHANU:THE LAST BOOK OF EARTHSEA (Gollancz; 219 pp.; A$29.95)

Ursula Le Guin's 'Earthsea' trilogy — *A Wizard of Earthsea* (1968), *The Tombs of Atuan* (1971) and *The Farthest Shore* (1972) — appeared between 1968 and 1973, and is now regarded as one of the all-time great works of fantasy and children's literature. Now more than twenty years after the first book comes *Tehanu*, which directly follows the events of *The Farthest Shore*.

What motivated Le Guin to resume the series? She is one of the 'originals' of the fantasy field — as eminent almost as Tolkien — and doesn't need to churn out sequel volumes like David Eddings does. The answer? 'To square the work out,' she said in a recent interview. 'There's the book about the young man (Ged the young wizard), the book about the young woman (Tenar, the young priestess), the book about the old man (Ged) and then a blank. Where's the book about the old woman?'

Tehanu then is largely about Tenar, now a middle-aged farmer's widow living on the island of Gont, to which comes Ged, the once-powerful archmage who saved Earthsea. He is now, however, bereft of his magic powers. None of them has power — neither Ged, Tenar, nor the physically scarred young girl, Therru (Tehanu), whom Tenar takes in. 'Earthsea is not in very good shape' at this time, as Le Guin has stated.

Le Guin almost performs a deconstruction on the original trilogy — amending details here and revising concepts there. Now we have social criticism in a mythic structure. There are no more quests and 'boys' adventures', but instead the harsh reality of male arrogance, of child abuse, and the misuse of power.

As Ged and Tenar come haltingly together they seem impotent in the face of a corrupt mage, but Therru is more than she seems, and women now, unlike men, can look safely into a dragon's eyes. Le Guin is almost saying that in the end our old values aren't working, we have to work out our own salvations and try something new, be consciously different, if civilization is to survive.

Tehanu, therefore, is very different from its three predecessors. It has switched from the male to the female perspective. it is no longer a young person's but an adult's book. it no longer details the male triumphs of traditional fantasy but rather the 'heroic acts of women, children and middle-aged men'. Le Guin has vowed that the series is now complete. It may be structurally a lopsided quartet, but Le Guin, with *Tehanu*, has only enhanced and deepened the value of this classic of the imagination.

J. G. Ballard: WAR FEVER (Collins; 176 pp.; A$29.99)

J. G. Ballard: THE KINDNESS OF WOMEN (HarperCollins; 286 pp.; A$32.95)

War Fever is J. G. Ballard's first collection of short stories for eight years. In that period the novel and film of *Empire of the Sun* have made his writings of 'inner space' known to a wide public.

The title story, 'War Fever', written before the Gulf War, eerily evokes the self-perpetuating nature of war, but this time in the Lebanon, where an ingenious attempt by a young idealist to end the fighting is cynically overturned.

In 'The Secret History of World War Three', the time is 1995 and Ronald Reagan is back in the Oval Office and an American public pays more attention to his daily medical bulletins than to a brief nuclear exchange.

Ballard avoids glamour through bleak internal landscapes and flat impacted prose. In 'The Man Who Walked on the Moon', an American assumes the role of a former astronaut to bum money from tourists at Rio's Copacabana beach. The loneliness of the astronaut is contrasted with elements of the human condition.

Like David Suzuki, who expounded this view in Canberra recently, Ballard believes that the media manipulate and indeed often create reality. Ballard, therefore, takes today's headlines and pushes them to surreal extremes. A ship with its 'Dream Cargoes', which consist of toxic waste, provides the means for physical and symbolic flight — a familiar theme in Ballard's writing. 'Love in a Colder Climate' is set in a devastated post-AIDS world where the viewing of erotic videos and compulsory sex are dictated by the State to ensure the continuation of the human race.

The Kindness of Women is the sequel to J. G. Ballard's award-winning 1984 novel *Empire of the Sun*, which was later made into a blockbuster movie by Steven Spielberg. That novel was a prime example of 'faction' — a true story with a loose veneer of fiction. *Empire of the Sun* recreated Ballard's boyhood in Shanghai before the Japanese invasion and his internment during the Second World War.

The Kindness of Women, which overlaps the previous book at its beginning, is even more autobiographical. His boyhood imprisonment is a ghost that Ballard takes most of his life to exorcise. On his return to Britain after the war, despite having spent three years in a Japanese camp, he is shocked by British society — its narrowness, its rigid class system and its infatuation with traditions that have lost all meaning. As a schoolboy and then a medical student for two years in Cambridge, Ballard becomes interested in psychoanalysis and also the possibility of nuclear apocalypse, physically represented by the American bases surrounding Cambridge.

The narrative follows his career as a writer after brief sojourns in the RAF and advertising. His obsessions are reflected in his early science fiction, which depicts abandoned space launch pads and decaying entropic worlds and, later, the macabre depictions of 'inner space' of his novels *Crash* and *Concrete Island*. The novel concludes with the wheel turning full circle as *Empire of the Sun* is made into a film and Ballard can at last recreate the images of his youth.

The title *The Kindness of Women* reflects the small number of women who 'rescued' Ballard from his internal conflicts: Peggy, who cared for him in the Japanese prisoner-of-war camp; his wife 'Miriam' (Mary in reality), who died tragically early, leaving Ballard to bring up his three young children in suburban Shepperton; Dorothy, Miriam's older sister, who lets Ballard make love to her on his first encounter after the death; and Sally, whose drugged fervor of the sixties envelops Ballard who, in turn, in the sixties feels 'violence and pornography provided ... some meaning to Miriam's death and the unnumbered victims of the war in China'. Finally Cleo, his last love, returns him to internal peace.

Ballard has said recently, 'I chose my title to stress the very important role that women have played in my life in giving me, I hope, a positive view of the world of the future ... there are probably more women in the book than in all my previous books put together — certainly more sympathetic women'. Such women seem to give more to Ballard than he gives to them, certainly emotionally.

The Kindness of Women takes us out of the sun and into the Ballardian twilight, one in which constant flashes of illumination burst forth from the episodic narrative. It is unlikely to achieve the huge success of *Empire of the sun*. Nonetheless, with Ballard providing a warmth and emotion missing from his earlier cold and austere novels, his new novel is sure to linger long in the memory of its readers as a remarkable portrayal of an unusual English writer.

Isaac Asimov and Robert Silverberg: NIGHTFALL (Gollancz; 352 pp.; A$27.95)

Isaac Asimov's classic 1941 short story 'Nightfall' has now been expanded into a full-length novel in a collaboration of two of science fiction's best-known writers. While the novel lacks the tautness and sudden impact of the original, it does allow the careful build-up of scientific discovery as the inhabitants of the planet Kalgish slowly uncover the terror and destruction that night will bring to a world that has known only ever-present light for two millennia.

This reworking offers more hope than the original story, as scientists and religious fanatics form an uneasy alliance against the cataclysm of *Nightfall*.

Isaac Asimov, edited by Martin H. Greenberg: THE ASIMOV CHRONICLES (Century; 836 pp.; A$35)

Isaac Asimov has recycled and repackaged his short stories more often than any science fiction conservationist would have believed possible. Nonetheless if any library or Asimov fan is looking for a single comprehensive collection of Asimov's short stories, she or he could do no better than Martin Greenberg's current compilation of Asimov's fifty years of writing from 1939 to 1989.

It's only a pity that Greenberg did not package the collection with either a critical introduction or observations by Asimov to make it even more worthwhile as a single-author collection. For example, in *The Best of Isaac Asimov* (1973), Asimov provided interesting details about the stories, all of which appear again in *The Asimov Chronicles*.

Asimov's short stories are not renowned for their literary depth. Strong simply story-lines underpinned by scientific detachment and technological extrapolation are his norm. Thus in 'Franchise' future elections are decided by computers, with a single dash of human input, while 'The Ugly Little Boy' sees a Neanderthal child brought through time to the present.

A number of stories reveal that science fiction predictions often go astray. Asimov's giant mainframe computers and punched tape inputs of the twenty-first century betray their origin in that particular computing environment of the late 1940s and early 1950s.

Asimov's best stories, however, date from those decades. His later fiction comprises mainly blockbuster novels. The most recent stories in *The Asimov Chronicles* are trifles from his 'Azazel' and 'Black Widower' series, more gimmickry than depth. Nonetheless Asimov has said 'I'll write as I please' and 'I won't buy success at the price of self consciousness'. *The Asimov Chronicles* will add to that success, even if the stories remind us that the Asimov canon has not advanced in recent years.

David Eddings: THE RUBY KNIGHT (Grafton; 347 pp.; A$29.99)
Marion Bradley, Julian May and Andre Norton: BLACK TRILLIUM (Grafton; 347 pp.; A$29.95)
Guy Gavriel Kay: TIGANA (Penguin; 688 pp.; A$19.99)
Martin Middleton: CIRCLE OF LIGHT (Pan; 379 pp.; A$10.99)
Mike Ashley (ed.): THE PENDRAGON CHRONICLES (Robinson; 417 pp.; A$16.95)
Charles de Lint: MOONHEART (Pan; 485 pp.; A$19.99)

This recent crop of fantasy novels ranges from the latest in David Eddings's bestselling 'Elenium' series to an Australian debut in this lucrative market.

David Eddings has just signed with Grafton a five-book contract that the publisher describes as 'the largest ever made in the UK with a fantasy or sf author'. Eddings's popularity with the younger fantasy audience remains unchecked, with three further volumes of the 'Elenium' saga promised.

In the second of the quintet, *The Ruby Knight*, the quest to release the young Queen of Elenia from her crystal prison centres around the need to find the Bhelliom, a long-lost jewel. Unfortunately the custodian of the jewel is so much a clone of Tolkien's Gollum, at least in language and action, that seekers of true fantasy originality will be disappointed.

In *Black Trillium*, three renowned fantasy writers combine to recount the attempt by triplet princesses to save their country. All three princesses must learn to overcome their frailties and weaknesses before the predictable yet satisfying happy ending.

Guy Gavriel Kay, who has worked with Christopher Tolkien, and wrote an outstanding trilogy 'The Fionovar Tapestry' (1984–7), has now created in *Tigana* another

complex world of fantasy and magic, this time loosely based on Renaissance Italy. This epic fantasy, however, stretches beyond simple black-and-white values, as success to restore the memory and reality of the province of Tigana by a motley group of exiles is tinged with tragedy.

Despite its recent Australian sales success *Circle of Light*, the first in a trilogy by Queensland writer Martin Middleton, is essentially derivative of the best works of the genre. An orphaned servant Teal learns of his true destiny, which involves, as with some of David Eddings's heroes, much eating and fighting. He finds a ring with mystic powers and takes on the 'Dark Forces'. An Australian setting might have improved on an uninspiring plot and one-dimensional characterization.

Arthurian fantasy legends are encapsulated in *The Pendragon Chronicles*, Michael Ashley's collection of sixteen stories that testify to the endurance and popularity of Arthurian myth. All but two of the selections, which begin with the young Arthur and trace events to after his death, are post-1950 works reflecting the contemporary potency of the legend. Australian author Keith Taylor, with his dark fantasy 'Buried Silver', ranks among the best in an excellent collection.

Charles de Lint's *Moonheart* unusually juxtaposes Celtic and North American mythologies in a narrative that moves from contemporary Ottawa to prehistoric Canada. When Sara Kendell finds an old Celtic ring in an ancient Indian medicine bag, a centuries-old duel is unleashed. De Lint has said of contemporary fantasy that 'one can deal with the mystic matter of our hearts by superimposing them against the sharp edge of reality'. *Moonheart* brilliantly achieves this objective.

Anne Rice: THE WITCHING HOUR
(Chatto & Windus; 965 pp.; A$34.95)
Richard Dalby (ed.): THE MAMMOTH BOOK OF GHOST STORIES
(Robinson; 654 pp.; A$14.95)

The surprise Number One bestseller of early 1991 in the United States was Anne Rice's *The Witching Hour*. While Rice has attracted a growing number of followers with such cult novels as her Venetian chiller *Cry to Heaven* (1982), hers was a relatively unfamiliar name amongst the Kings and Le Carres on the bestseller list.

The Witching Hour, largely set in her beloved New Orleans, will ensure her literary reputation. Rice's two main characters are Rown Mayfair, a female neurosurgeon, who mysteriously knows which of her patients will be cured in advance, and Michael Curry, a blue-collar businessman with psychic gifts. Neither is initially aware of the supernatural forces that will bring them together.

The Witching Hour possesses a structural complexity that ensures the reader's attention scarcely falters during 965 pages of text. Hot, steamy, decadent New Orleans provides a backdrop of both beauty and terror, thereby reflecting the plot — the 'devil incarnate' seeks to assume earthly form. Rice's lengthy passages of brutal horror, earthy eroticism and historical recollection are integral to a story that ends on more than a hint of a sequel.

The dreamlike power of *The Witching Hour* is reflected in many of the fifty stories in Richard Dalby's *Mammoth Book of Ghost Stories*, which represents excellent value for money. Dalby's selection ranges from classic authors such as Charles Dickens and Oscar Wilde to new masters of terror such as Ramsey Campbell.

The late Robert Aickman's 'The Unsettled Dust' comes closest to Rice's potent spell. Once more there is a decaying historical house and mysterious family secrets — in this case the tragic death of the lover of two sisters. The result is a ghost story with chilling psychological undertones.

David G. Hartwell (ed.): THE DARK DESCENT: MEDUSA IN THE SHIELD
(Grafton; 368 pp.; A$29.95)
George Beahm (ed.): THE STEPHEN KING COMPANION
(Macdonald; 365 pp.; A$32.95)
Douglas E. Winter (ed.): DARK VISIONS
(Gollancz; 264 pp.; A$29.95 hb, A$10.95 pb)
Chris Morgan (ed.): DARK FANTASIES
(Legend; 319 pp.; A$10.95)
David Sutton (ed.): DARK VOICES 2
(Pan; 223 pp.; A$9.99)

The current boom in original horror literature owes much, of course, to the phenomenon of Stephen King but, as David Hartwell reveals in the second of his three-volume definite anthology of horror, *Medusa in the Shield*, the traditions of short-story horror are well established. Thus Edgar Allan Poe and Henry James rub shoulders with H. P. Lovecraft and Sheridan Le Fanu in the twenty stories included in Hartwell's collection. King's own classic novella 'The Monkey' shows effectively the evil that a small toy monkey unleashes on an American family.

King's readers can be divided roughly into two groups — the mainstream readers and his 'fans'. It will probably be the latter who buy George Beahm's *The Stephen King Companion*, an excellent pot-pourri of Kingiana. Apart from collected interviews and analyses of King's work, which are of general interest, the details of his house's wrought-iron designs (bats and griffins) and photographs of Maine will probably attract only the King aficionados — of which there are enough to make Beahm's compilation profitable.

The best critical writings on Stephen King have been by Douglas Winter, who has now collected in *Dark Visions* seven original stories by Stephen King, Dan Simmons and George R. R. Martin.

Surprisingly, King's stories are the weakest. In 'The Reploids', a tv star from an alternate universe blunders onto the Johnny Carson set. 'Sneakers' features a haunted toilet!

The contributions by Hugo-winning novelist Dan Simmons are the strongest, with 'Metastatis' telling of the messianic liberation of cancer 'vampires'.

Dark Fantasies, whose editor Chris Morgan promises 'no slime, no chainsaws', focuses on psychological horror. This is best reflected in Stephen Gallagher's 'Lifeline', in which telephone callers are linked mysteriously to the dead, and Ian Watson's 'Tales from Weston Willow', in which a close-knit village community prevents newcomers leaving.

In *Dark Voices 2*, another excellent anthology, Cherry Wilder's 'Alive in Venice' stands out; it tells of a trip by a fourteen-year-old girl to Venice, where she is literally captured by the past. Brian Stableford's 'Behind the Wheel' is a gruesome motoring version of revenge beyond the grave.

Terry Pratchett: MOVING PICTURES (Gollancz; 279 pp.; A$29.95)
Terry Pratchett: WINGS (Doubleday; 157 pp.; A$17.95)

Hollywood meets Discworld in Terry Pratchett's latest bestselling comic novel *Moving Pictures*. Something strange begins to happen in 'Holy Wood' near to Pratchett's familiar city setting of Ankh-Morpork and its residents of the Unseen University. An alternate reality begins to draw the denizens to 'Holy Wood', where imps painting with brushes inside cameras record the first output of the Discworld film industry!

An undergraduate wizard Victor, the ex-milkmaid Ginger and Gaspode 'the Wonder Dog' re-enact the Pickford/Chaplin era of Hollywood through Pratchett's zany vision of the 'clicks'.

Moving Pictures is almost impossible to describe. It is Pratchett's careful build-up of sustained hilarity through puns, jokes and humorous inventions that sustains his essentially basic plots. The making of the Civil War epic *Blown Away*; a parody of the final scene in *King Kong* featuring the orang utan Librarian of the Unseen University, who really is paid peanuts, and Gaspode's confrontation with 'Death', 'the final frontier', are just a few of the comic highlights of *Moving Pictures*.

Wings is a slightly disappointing finale to Pratchett's 'nome' trilogy that began with *Truckers* and *Diggers*, the saga of four-inch-high aliens who emerge from beneath the floorboards of a department store to regain access to their Moon-based spaceship. The plot shortcomings, which were overcome by the original concept in the first volume and manic over-activity in the second, are only too evident in *Wings*. The chapter headings from *A Scientific Encyclopaedia for the Enquiring Young Nome*, however, still delight with such quotes as 'science explains what is happening around us the whole time. So does religion but science is better because it comes up with more understandable excuses when it's wrong'.

Pratchett might need to reconsider the format of his future books for 'young adults'; perhaps three slender volumes might not have been better combined into one solid novel. It is rare, however, for Pratchett to teeter on his comic pedestal. *Moving Pictures* certainly proves that *Wings* is only a temporary hiccup.

Terry Pratchett: REAPER MAN (Gollancz; 253 pp.; A$32.50)

When Terry Pratchett visited Canberra in 1990 he told his ANU/*Canberra Times* Literary Lunch audience that the most popular characters in his Discworld series were Granny Weatherwax, the Luggage, and Death! He promised to feature Death more prominently in a future novel.

Reaper Man has now arrived. Death is now out of a jobs for personality reasons; therefore there has been an increase in the number of 'undead'. This causes a bit of a problem for the inhabitants of Discworld, as ghosts and poltergeists arrive *en masse* to 'hang about'.

A zany subplot provides an explanation of how shopping malls breed with shopping trolleys, taking on a life of their own and attacking the senior officers of the Unseen University. Pratchett believes that 'shopping malls are predators that draw the life out of a city so the city starts to die in the middle'.

While the two plots don't really come together, they provide an effective basis for Pratchett's constantly inventive humour, which allows him, as always, to explore deeper issues such as the meaning of life in the 'great big cold universe out there'.

Terry Pratchett: WITCHES ABROAD (Gollancz; 252 pp.; A$38)

The phenomenally popular and prolific British author Terry Pratchett will return to Canberra in April 1992. Since his last visit some fifteen months ago, he has produced three more Discworld novels.

The latest novel, *Witches Abroad*, features his redoubtable trio of witches from *Wyrd sisters*. Granny Weatherwax discovers that her long-lost sister Lily has forced the people of Genua to enact fairy tales. This scenario not only allows Pratchett to parody the British abroad, from mangled Franglais to disdain for foreign cooking, and also indulge in some wonderful twists to such conventional fairy stories as 'Little Red Riding Hood', 'The Sleeping Beauty' and especially 'Cinderella'.

A prince turns into a frog each night (he has to have a pond in his bedroom); Greebo the cat turns into almost a human being (he still likes to curl up under the table and have his tummy tickled); Mrs Gogal, a Voodoo witch, recreates zombies, while Margret's secondhand magic wand can only produce pumpkins. *Witches Abroad* takes the reader on a Pratchett holiday, but this time in a traditional pantomime setting entirely suitable for the holiday season.

Eric Willmot: BELOW THE LINE (Hutchinson; 202 pp.; A$12.95)

Eric Willmot's *Below the Line* is set in the early twenty-first century, with the north of Australia under the control of the Indonesian Republic of South Irian. Speculative fiction often calls for the logical suspension of disbelief, but Willmot fails to sketch in adequately the necessary detailed political, economic and social background to life below and above the 'Brisbane line' to convince the sceptical reader of the course of events.

Following Indonesia's invasion of Papua New Guinea, war, which 'nobody wanted but the generals of Java and Australia', ensues. Refugees flood into Northern Australia, 200,000 being 'disguised forward strike troops' with apparently no Australians being aware of this fact. 'Australia then attacked Indonesia by sea and air but this served little purpose'. The only military help for Australia comes from New Zealand and a small volunteer force from Japan, as Europe has equated Australia's treatment of the Aborigines to the South African situation and has refused to help. Australia, the continent divided, sues for peace, and the United States and Britain propose in the UN that South Irian becomes a recognized separate state. Australia south of the line is a vaguely delineated totalitarian state

with all large capital estates nationalized. This apparently causes no problems, as the millionaires are only 'real estate agents' and developers!

No one would deny the potential of a novel detailing the aftermath of such an Indonesian invasion. Indeed, Professor Des Ball of the ANU has recently [April 1991] touched raw nerves in Jakarta with his warnings of military build-ups in South-east Asia, but there has to be some examination of Australia's own isolationist attitudes.

A flimsy speculative scenario might have been held together by a strong narrative with believable characters, but here *Below the Line* also fails. The main character Angela Steen, with a background that should have entailed independence of action and a vocabulary replete with four-letter words, becomes a passive element in the unfolding of the plot and the elucidation of a military secret she may or may not have learnt in an Indonesian prison camp where she was brutally raped.

Steen takes frequent showers and baths, is sexually analysed by computer diagnosis, learns Aboriginal sex secrets, and becomes 'a bitch in heat' after meeting renegade Australian Army captain Oliver Maccii. He is told he 'can do anything with me you want to' after she tries to resist the 'strange feeling of tingling warmth that swept over her'. Nearly as many pages are devoted to sexual encounters as to the quest beyond enemy lines in South Irian. The scientific secret that prompts Angela's wanderings, however, turns out to be something of an anti-climax, while the abrupt romantic conclusion to *Below the Line* sits uneasily with practical reality.

Eric Willmot is an original thinker and lively administrator, although for the publicists to claim he is 'committed to challenging those who try to manipulate our most essential community services such as education and medical services for their own ends' might be seen as somewhat provocative. His brief allusions in *Below the Line* to technological advances, such as an airtrack train, confirm his inventive scientific bent.

Similarly, his descriptions of life in Townsville under South Irianese rule lead one to wish that Dr Willmot had spent more time depicting the two societies co-existing in Australia than following his tenuous plot north of the line.

Willmot's implicit views on Australia's moral decline, lack of involvement with Asia, treatment of Aborigines and distrust of Anglo-American influences might have been better treated in a polemical tract. Doris Lessing in her 'Canopus in Argos' series also used novels set in the future for didactic purposes, but her fictional infrastructure was solid.

Michael Crichton: JURASSIC PARK
(Century; A$29.95)

Michael Crichton has specialized in the scientific thriller, with such novels as *The Andromeda Strain* and *Sphere*. Now *Jurassic Park* combines palaentology, biotechnology and Chaos theory to bring the dinosaurs back to life in the late twentieth century.

An elderly multi-millionaire conceives the possibility of a dinosaur theme park on a remote island off Costa Rica. Dinosaurs are recreated by bio-engineers from preserved dinosaur DNA. The pre-opening ceremony with assembled scientists, investors and, perhaps unnecessarily, two 'cute' American children, is thrown into panic when the computer network controlling the island is sabotaged and the splendidly imagined varieties of dinosaurs, who are far from passive grazers, go free.

Crichton convincingly documents the scientific background that makes the whole development seem reasonable. His characters, as in his other novels, may be one-dimensional, and spend most of their time making speeches, but they are secondary to the fast-moving plot as the humans race against time and the dinosaur threat — not just to the island but possibly to the world.

No wonder Steven Spielberg has bought the movie rights for $1.5 million. *Jurassic Park* is a thriller with teeth.

Ray Bradbury: A GRAVEYARD FOR LUNATICS
(Grafton; 285 pp.; A$29.95)

Ray Bradbury has followed his nostalgic detective-fiction evocation of 1949's Los Angeles, *Death is a Lonely Business* (1986) with another beautifully drawn period piece, *A Graveyard of Lunatics*, set in the same city in 1954. The narrator is once again the younger Bradbury, a writer of pulp stories who has now been hired to write a horror-movie script.

The 'graveyard for lunatics' is Maximus films, where the streets of ancient Rome or small-town America come alive. When a real-life Phantom of the Opera is spotted and the infamous head of the studio is seemingly alive after a fatal car crash twenty years earlier, Bradbury has in place the necessary ingredients for a successful mix of nostalgia and gentle horror.

Dan Simmons: SUMMER OF NIGHT
(Headline; 473 pp.; A$34.95 hb, A$19.95 pb)
Dean R. Koontz: COLD FIRE
(Headline; 374 pp.; A$29.95)
John Shirley: IN DARKNESS WAITING
(Grafton; 348 pp.; A$9.95)
T. M. Wright: THE PLACE
(Gollancz; 278 pp.; A$11.95)
Susan Hill (ed.): THE WALKER BOOK OF GHOST STORIES
(Walker; 223 pp.; A$29.95)
Ramsey Campbell: NEEDING GHOSTS
(Century; 80 pp.; A$25 hb; A$12.95 pb)

Headline has became one of the most successful publishers in the United Kingdom in only three years of operation. Part of their success has been in specializing in the best authors of a genre, in this case, horror. Headline has thus secured twenty-eight Koontz back titles, while Dan Simmons has in the last five years won nearly every award in the science fiction, fantasy and horror genres.

Simmons's *Summer of Night* is something of a disappointment after the intellectual pyrotechnics of his superb *Hyperion* series. The plot is very reminiscent of that of Stephen King's *It*. Prepubescent boys in a small midwest American town in the summer of 1960 tackle unspeakable evil emanating from a mysterious school bell, the Borgia bell. Why it should surface there calls for some initial suspension of disbelief, but Simmons is too good a writer not to ring effective horror chimes as the children struggle to survive against the supernatural horror.

Dean R. Koontz topped the American hardback bestseller list with *Cold Fire*. Again there are echoes of a King novel — *The Dead Zone* — as a school teacher foresees events of violence or unnecessary death and works to prevent their occurrence. A female reporter joins him in a search back to his childhood

for the origin of his powers, only to uncover the hidden evil of 'the Enemy'. Koontz, like Simmons, can breathe fresh life into some basic horror scenarios.

Less successful, however, are John Shirley's *In Darkness Waiting* and T. M. Wright's *The Place*.

In the former title, psychic monsters are unleashed in a controlled experiment by a multinational company on yet another small American town. This revelation comes early in the novel, and the repetitive violence and murder blunt the overall message that humanity rather than supernatural forces is the source of contemporary evil.

T. M. Wright in *The Place* juxtaposes the as-yet-untested psychic powers of an eight-year-old girl with the horrors unleashed by a mad leader of an underground commune.

More literature and less violent are the stories in *The Walker Book of Ghost Stories*, which is intended for younger readers. Authors such as Penelope Lively, Jan Mark and Leon Garfield prove that ghosts can range in temperament from the humorous to the decidedly cantankerous. Susan Hill has brought together an excellent collection for children with suitable ethereal colour illustrations.

Decidedly for adult readers is Ramsey Campbell's novella *Needing Ghosts*. Campbell's main character, an author, who is either mad or dead, engages in a nightmare journey through a dark and surreal landscape. *Needing Ghosts* can be interpreted as an account of a schizophrenic descent into hell. Its ambiguous evil is far more terrifying than the graphic detail of the 'splatter' novels produced by some other British writers, such as Shaun Hutson.

Brian Aldiss: DRACULA UNBOUND
(Grafton; 199 pp.; A$32.95)
Radu Florescu and Raymond T. McNally: DRACULA: PRINCE OF MANY FACES
(Little, Brown & Co.; 261 pp.; A$19.95)

Count Dracula, as fictionally conceived by Bram Stoker in 1897, has evolved in the twentieth century into one of the most famous depictions of supernatural evil. Brian Aldiss in *Dracula Unbound* provides the latest twist to the Dracula fictional dimension.

It is important, however, to remember that Stoker's creation has a real source, Vlad the Impaler (1431–1476), the Romanian prince whom Florescu and McNally portray as even more interesting than the fictional vampire. The myth can be used, however, for a variety of purposes, and Aldiss uses Dracula to create an alternative race that threatens humanity itself.

Dracula Unbound begins when a palaeontological dig in Utah uncovers in a sixty-five million year old rock stratum a skeleton with a stake through its heart. Joe Bodenland, Aldiss's scientific entrepreneur who appeared first in *Frankenstein Unbound*, tackles Count Dracula, who not only intends to eliminate Bram Stoker in Victorian England but also the human race to allow his legions of the 'undead' to triumph.

Unfortunately Aldiss mixes so many time periods, from the distant past to a twenty-sixth century Libyan empire, speaking idioms, from colloquial Texan to high Victorian; and concepts, from the death of the dinosaurs to time travel, that the end result, while entertaining enough, is a relatively minor piece in the Aldiss canon.

This is one Dracula story that can be said to lack bite.

S. P. Somtow: MOONDANCE
(Gollancz; 564 pp.; A$34.95)
Brian Stableford: THE WEREWOLVES OF LONDON
(Simon and Schuster; 390 pp.; A$35)
John Farris: FIENDS
(Grafton; 331 pp.; A$32.95)
Richard Layman: ONE RAINY NIGHT
(Headline; 308 pp.; A$19.95)
Peter James: SWEETHEART
(Gollancz; 278 pp.; A$29.95)
Thomas Palmer: DREAM SCIENCE
(Collins Harvill; 308 pp.; A$32.95)

Winter chills abound in these novels of both direct and subtle terror. Somtow and Stableford involve werewolves as their mechanism of menace.

Moondance spans eight decades of American history as European humans cum werewolves migrate and confront their North American counterparts in violent and bloody encounters. Somtow's undoubtedly powerful lycanthropic images, mixed with the terror of schizophrenia, are only weakened by some over-indulgence in descriptions of violence and bodily functions.

Brian Stableford's *The Werewolves of London* is set in Victorian England, but the werewolves are hardly leaders of the pack in his fiction. A mysterious discovery in Egypt unleashes the ancient powers of the fallen angels of biblical mythology. The focal point of the demonic battle are a young man and a young boy who try to comprehend their powers at the same time as human and supernatural forces fight to control them. Stableford's various digressions into topics such as the Victorian class system and Kantian thought give *The Werewolves of London* an unusual and effective depth to a work that is far better than its title and cover imply.

Fiends is less ambitious, and falls into the middling category of American horror. As in Stableford's book, the plot includes 'God's rejects' — in this case 'Eve's dirty children' who take the form of mothlike vampires, who infect their victims through thorns on the tips of their fingers.

Richard Layman's *One Rainy Night* has an even more tenuous idea: yet another American small town goes mad — this time when voodoo-infected rain falls! Layman has written that 'a horror novel is like a big bag . . . the writer can stuff inside it whatever he likes'. Unfortunately, Layman forgot to fill it for *One Rainy Night*.

British author Peter James, when researching *Sweetheart*, underwent a series of hypnotic rebirthing and regression sessions. The result is a story of the haunting of a yuppie couple in an idyllic country mill turned satanic. Essentially *Sweetheart* is in the gothic tradition, with the addition of gruesome deaths to satisfy the contemporary horror market. Unlike Layman, James can write real characters and believable dialogue.

In *Dream Science* Thomas Palmer's main character, an American mutual funds manager, finds himself in an enclosed tomblike office in an alternate universe. Palmer's disturbing, Kafkaesque visions and questioning of reality make for a truly dreadful day at the office, but Palmer unfortunately cannot sustain the reader's interest to the enigmatic conclusion. Nonetheless, it reaffirms that the most chilling novels are often the least explicit.

Brian Stableford: SEXUAL CHEMISTRY
(Simon and Schuster; 229 pp.; A$35)

Readers simply seeing the title of Dr Brian Stableford's latest book might wonder if this were a sex aids manual or a new device of student-grabbing universities to increase enrolments in the sciences. Read the subtitle and you find it to be 'sardonic tales of the genetic revolution'.

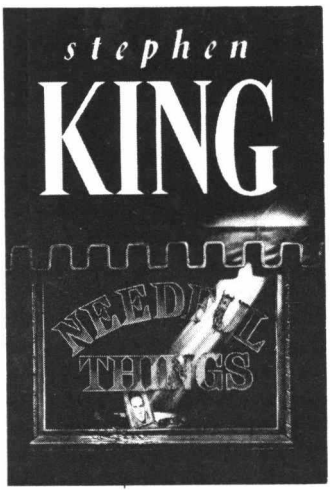
Stableford speculates, through fiction, where genetic engineering will take us in the future. Thus science will allow male pregnancies ('Bedside Conversations'); degrees of immortality ('The Magic Bullet' and 'And He Not Busy Being Born'); and bio-engineered animals and even household goods ('The Furniture of Life's Ambition'). Human beings, however, seem not to change much over the centuries.

Stableford calls his characters, usually only two or three per story, 'literary caricatures', but beneath the cold prose and dark humour are quirky individuals who are hardly stereotyped scientists in white coats. In the end Stableford remains optimistic 'that the rewards which can come from the wise and constructive uses of biotechnology will more than compensate for the undoubted hazards of careless or malevolent use'. We can only hope so, as he leads the reader through 'an infinite wilderness of ifs in genetic engineering'.

Stephen King: NEEDFUL THINGS
(Hodder & Stoughton; 698 pp.; A$34.95)
Robert McCammon: MINE
(Pocket Books; 487 pp.; A$9.95)

Needful Things, the new bestselling blockbuster from Stephen King, is the last of his 'Castle Rock' stories. Castle Rock is the fictional small town in Maine where King has located many of his characters and plots, from *Cujo* to *The Dark Half*. According to King, 'everybody who's ever been in Castle Rock comes into the book to take a kind of curtain call' — for example, Ace Merrill, who was the bully in King's novella 'The Body', continues on the wrong side of the tracks.

King says in a recent interview: 'Castle Rock became more real to me . . . but you become complacent; you begin to accept boundaries; the familiarity of the place discourages



risks'. This shows in *Needful Things* as King's sequence of horror becomes predictable. This is partly the fault of the plot line, which is signalled very early in the book. When the mysterious Leland Gaunt opens a new shop in town called 'Needful Things' it is clearly more than just a curio store. As King has said, 'whatever you want most in the world is in that shop'.

Thus when the first customer, eleven-year-old Brian Rusk, finds that elusive 1956 baseball cap for a bargain price, we realize immediately that this might be a Faustian bargain. As the rest of the town falls under Gaunt's manipulative spell, troubles begin in a small way but soon erupt into violent deaths. Sheriff Alan Pangborn has the unenviable task of unravelling the mystery and confronting the Devil. Unfortunately, the book takes nearly 700 pages to reach this point.

Robert McCammon's *Mine* evokes echoes of King's claustrophobic *Misery* in his saga of a mother's search for her baby kidnapped by a crazed female ex-sixties radical group killer. Journalist Laura Clayborne undertakes a nightmare chase in pursuit of her baby to a literally cliff-hanging denouement. Underpinning this fast-moving plot are a number of believable characters, notably the relics of the sixties and the seventies who have little left to call 'mine'.

McCammon has now left the horror field — his latest novel *Boys Life*, which owes more to Steven Spielberg than Stephen King. Maybe now that Castle Rock is 'all gone-kaput', according to King, it's time for him also to move onto fresh challenges?

J. R. R. Tolkien: THE LORD OF THE RINGS
(HarperCollins; 1200 pp.; A$75)

John Ronald Reuel Tolkien was born on 3 January 1892. The publishing industry assault on the reading public to capitalize on the centenary of his birth has begun. The fact that it coincides with the Christmas buying spree has ensured a plethora of books, calendars and ephemera, including Tolkien watches and Christmas crackers! Two of Tolkien's children John and Priscilla have combined to produce the Tolkien family album, due for publication in January 1992.

When Unwin Hyman was taken over by HarperCollins there were grave fears that the Tolkien heritage crafted by Allen & Unwin and their supplementary fantasy line would be downgraded. These fears have proved to be unfounded, and the first product of the new alliance is a superb achievement.

Some have decried Tolkien's achievements. Professor Anne Barton of Cambridge University is wary of Tolkien's 'rather grandiose and misconceived view of life. What makes me nervous is that there is a kind of soft underbelly to it', while Michael Moorcock believes *'The Lord of the Rings* is a pernicious confirmation of the values of a mostly bankrupt middle class'. David Pringle writes in *Modern Fantasy* that the 'baggage [of social attitudes] counts for less when weighted against the book's central attraction. As near as possible . . . Tolkien's masterpiece is pure story.'

In this new edition, Alan Lee has added pictorial depth of great sensitivity. Christopher Tolkien, the literary executor of his father's works, said recently that Tolkien would have 'adored' Alan Lee's fifty original colour illustrations, each of which faces the relevant page of text. Lee is the award-winning British illustrator of such books as *Merlin Dreams* and *Castles*. While many might prefer to let their imagination run free, most will find that Lee's evocation of, for example, the hobbit characters and Gollum are superbly envisaged.

If there is to be one edition of *The Lord of the Rings* bought for a household or library this Christmas, surely this is it. Despite, or because of the highish price (and it does equate with the British price, so Australian buyers cannot complain), it is a sumptuous production that can be

read and treasured.

J. R. R. Tolkien: THE WAR OF THE RING
(Unwin Hyman; 476 pp.; A$49.95)

Christopher Tolkien's editing of his father's voluminous archives reaches its eighth volume with *The War of the Ring*, the third part of the 'history' of *The Lord of the Rings*. The text, despite its 476 pages, covers only two episodes from Tolkien's epic fantasy saga — from the Battle of Helm's Deep in *The Two Towers* to the confrontation between Gandalf and Sauron's ambassador at the Black Gate of Mordor.

As in the earlier volumes there is no continuous narrative, only extracts from the manuscripts interspersed with copious commentary, references and indexing. Christopher Tolkien successfully highlights how key episodes evolved over a succession of manuscript drafts, but only the 'trufan' and libraries will want this complete set of 'The History of Middle-Earth'.

Devotees of global book markets might be interested to note that the US edition from Houghton Mifflin costs US$21.95, while the British version retails in Australia for $49.95.

Martin H. Greenberg (ed.): AFTER THE KING: STORIES IN HONOUR OF J. R. R. TOLKIEN
(Pan; 534 pp.; A$35)

After the King was designed as a tribute to J. R. R. Tolkien, 'a present for the one hundredth anniversary of his birth'. Tolkien was born on 3 January 1892. In essence, this is less a *Festschrift* than a clever marketing ploy, but who cares when it provides the opportunity for some of the leading names in fantasy literature, such as Peter Beagle, Patrician McKillip, and Stephen Donaldson, to contribute original stories or novellas to an excellent anthology.

Terry Pratchett (one hesitates to think what Tolkien would have made of him) contributes a comic Discworld gem in 'Troll Bridge', as the aged Cohen the Barbarian confronts a decidedly maudlin troll under a bridge. Jane Yolen's 'Winter King' sees an outcast child find his true home, while John Brunner's evocation of village life for a war veteran just after the First World War cleverly blends pagan and Christian rites with a happy-ever-after ending.

Robert Rankin: THEY CAME AND ATE US
(Bloomsbury; 278 pp.; A$34.95)
Terry Pratchett: ERIC
(Gollancz; 155 pp.; A$8)
Harry Harrison and David Bischoff: BILL THE GALACTIC HERO ON THE PLANET OF TASTELESS PLEASURE
(Gollancz; 213 pp.; A$36)
John Sladek: BUGS
(Paladin; 224 pp.; A$12.95)

Robert Rankin said in a recent interview that 'straight fiction bores me to death because I don't want to read about real life. I don't want to read about people's psychological problems and bad love life.'

Readers certainly won't find much about these issues in *They Came and Ate Us*, the sequel to *Armageddon the Musical*. What they will find is zany British comedy that is too often over the top. They will encounter a time-travelling brussel sprout called Barry who just happens to be locked into one Elvis Presley whose mission is to prevent the forthcoming nuclear holocaust. Robert Rankin says he 'absolutely hated sprouts' as a child; perhaps this is why 'old Barry appears everywhere'.

Rankin tilts at various targets, such as environmentalists and organized religion, but he rarely achieves the controlled wit of his illustrious counterparts Terry Pratchett and Douglas Adams. Far better to go for the real thing — the paperback version of Terry Pratchett's *Eric*, which lacks the Josh Kirby illustrations of the original, but is still excellent value for money.

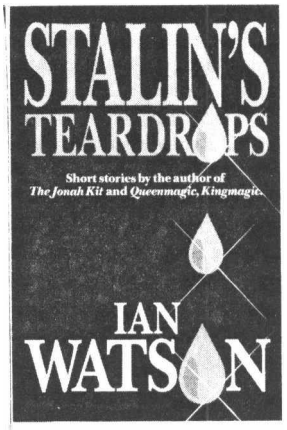
Eric is the fourteen-year-old hacker who, in Faustian fashion, summons the Devil but gets Rincewind, Discworld's incompetent wizard, and his itinerant luggage, instead. Comic mayhem results in typical Pratchett fashion.

Of the four novels reviewed, Harry Harrison and David Bischoff's *Bill the Galactic Hero on the Planet of Tasteless Pleasure* is the low point. The book features Harrison's mercenary soldier, created in the lively 1965 original, blundering his way through various planetary escapades. From the variable typography, taken from the American paperback original, to the inconsequential plot, it is clear that Bill really deserves an early death instead of an ongoing series.

The original *Bill the Galactic Hero* satirized such authors as Asimov and Heinlein in reasonable depth, but this new book falls so low as to declare Greg Bear as 'Greg Bore' and Stephen King as 'Stephen Thing'. Bill's romance with 'the beautiful princess Irma' is one- dimensional. A typical phrase is: 'To Bill, women were not mysterious beings; mystery implies intellectual thought'; Bill's views of women are decidedly 'coitus connected'.

Fellow American John Sladek, in contrast, goes from strength to strength with his black-comedy overviews of middle America. The bugs of his latest novel relate more to the glitches in life rather than those of the midwest high-tech factory in which his bewildered British writer Fred Jones finds himself employed.

Jones's bumbling and inhibited steps symbolize Britain for Sladek, who recently left there to return to his native USA. America is not spared, however, with its paranoid politicians and demonic military controlling a populace enslaved by the technology of the consumer society. In the end, the bugs in the system will bring the whole edifice crashing down, but until then Sladek seems to be saying to ride out today's 'moronic inferno' as best you can.



Ian Watson: STALIN'S TEARDROPS
(Gollancz; 270 pp.; A$35)

British author Ian Watson, despite his prolific output since his award-winning first novel *The Embedding* (1973), is much neglected in the popular canon, possibly because his idiosyncratic brand of metaphysical speculation rarely sells in large quantities. Like J. G. Ballard before

him he probably needs a bestseller, such as Ballard achieved with *Empire of the Sun*, in order for readers to seek out his earlier books.

Stalin's Teardrops comprises twelve short stories that reflect the diverse range of Watson's subject matter.

In the title story, particularly poignant after recent events in Russia, the forced distortions of Soviet cartographers eventually create an alternate reality.

In 'Tales from Weston Willow' the closeness of village life overrides and threatens individual action.

In 'The Eye of the Ayatollah' Watson describes in chilling fashion an Iranian mission to kill Salman Rushdie aided bizarrely by the actual eye of the dead Ayatollah!

In this challenging collection, Watson's characters are transformed by their strange circumstances and either succumb to or exorcise their particular demons.

Orson Scott Card: MAPS IN A MIRROR
(Legend; 675 pp.; A$19.95)
Orson Scott Card: XENOCIDE
(Legend; 463 pp.; A$17.95)
Orson Scott Card: THE WORTHING SAGA
(Legend; 396 pp.; A$17.95)

Orson Scott Card, still only forty, has now seen a reprinting of a substantial part of his science fiction writings. He has stated that 'the reader coming to my work will find that there is only rarely any science in my science fiction. I use the freedom of the genre to create the situations in which my stories take place.'

Maps in a Mirror collects forty-six stories, poems and novellas from his first story published in 1977 through to 1989. *The Worthing Saga* reprints and reworks elements of his familial galactic space odyssey, while *Xenocide* is a new novel in a sequence that began with the award-winning *Ender's Game* and *Speaker for the Dead*.

What has accounted for Card's publishing success? He is clearly first and foremost a good storyteller. Literary pyrotechnics are not his forte. His characterization is straightforward and his messages strong, although repetitive in one Card sitting.

The themes essentially derive from Card's Mormon upbringing. Thus his characters are often asked, as Card has said, 'to suffer or to cause unspeakable pain or sacrifice in order to save the community'.

His main characters are often children, such as the young Ender in *Ender's Game*, who is trained in isolation to eliminate the insectoid aliens via what he thinks initially is a computer game. These children often possess exceptional strengths and weaknesses, and are therefore easy for younger readers to empathize with — the coming-of-age ritual. Card believes in the 'perfectibility of human beings, at least in part through their own desires and works'.

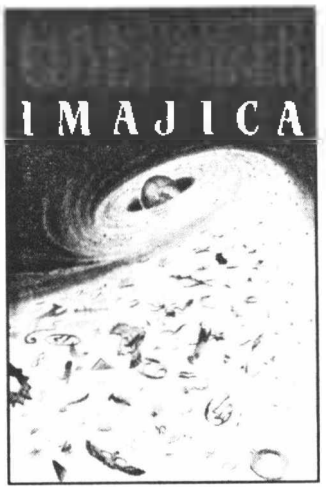
In *Maps in a Mirror* there is perhaps too much of Card's preoccupation with setting up a moral dilemma and setting the central character to resolve it through personal analysis and development. There are also a number of stories that should not have been published — for example, stories from Mormon publications. There are, however, many interesting pieces such as 'Lost boys', which recounts how the dead victims of a serial killer are reunited with their families.

In *Xenocide*, which harks back to the main character's destruction of almost an entire race, the planet Lusitania and its three species are themselves threatened with destruction. How the various 'families' overcome the threats viral, ecological and physical revolves around the influence of another incredibly intelligent young a child, a girl Quing-jao, whose talents are also open to abuse.

The Worthing Saga, a reprinting and reworking of earlier novels and short stories is, like *Xenocide*, a familial history set against galactic themes. It is a lesser achievement, but it contains the familiar theme of self-redemption through personal trial and self-discovery. Knowledge can be both temptation and saviour. Card is clearly much happier with individuals than with galactic empires. *The Worthing Sage* reflects the power of close-knit, rural communities.

Orson Scott Card may not be to everyone's taste in this large serving. His preaching at times transforms him into 'Brother Orson', while his lack of scientific explanations often irritates, but there is no denying the power of his storytelling and vision. There is no chance that this commercial House of Card will topple.

Clive Barker: IMAJICA
(HarperCollins; 854 pp.; A$32.95)

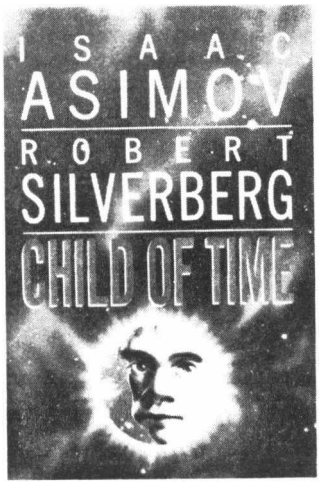


Strand Book Store in New York, one of the world's biggest and best-known book shops, recently reported the theft of a number of Stephen King advance proof copies. When asked what their next action would be, they said they would lock away their Clive Barker proofs!

Barker amassed a huge following in the 1980s. In America alone *Imajica* has had a 150,000 hardback printing, with US$200,000 spent on advertising. Barker, however, increasingly seems to capitalize on an exploration of the paranormal or the magical, as in his equally sprawling last novel *The Great and Secret Show*. *Imajica* is a long way from his original sparse and powerful *Books of Blood*, which established his name as a master of black fantasy.

Imajica constitutes five worlds, four of which are joined, while the fifth Earth is separate, despite an attempt 200 years ago for a conjunction. Barker's main characters ricochet through time and space in order to establish a contemporary reconciliation of the five worlds. Barker's imagination is without doubt a fertile one: his characters roam bizarre landscapes populated with creations of Boschean grotesqueness.

Barker is not one to limit his cosmological ambitions. Worlds are to be created or destroyed, with the balance always on a knife edge. Christ was a 'Reconciler' in the pantheon of gods headed by the 'Unbeheld'. The plot revolves around whether 'reconciliation' will prevail. For Barker fans, the question must be whether the mystical roller coaster is worth the ride for the memorable views or for the final landing.



Isaac Asimov and Robert Silverberg: CHILD OF TIME (Gollancz; 302 pp.; A$38)
Isaac Asimov, edited by Martin Greenberg: THE ASIMOV CHRONICLES, VOLUMES 1 AND 2 (Legend; 485 pp. and 381 pp.; A$17.95 each)
Isaac Asimov: ISAAC ASIMOV'S GUIDE TO EARTH AND SPACE (Random House; 285 pp.; A$35)
Robert Silverberg: THE FACE OF THE WATERS (Grafton; 348 pp.; A$32.95 hb, A$11.95 pb)
Robert Silverberg: SON OF MAN (VGSF; 192 pp.; A$10.95)

Child of Time is the second collaboration by noted American sf writers Isaac Asimov and Robert Silverberg. Like the first, *Nightfall*, this is an expansion of a well-known Asimov short story into a novel — in this case 'The Ugly Little Boy', which recounted the fate of a Neanderthal boy 'snatched' through time into the twenty-first century.

The poignant interaction of the small boy 'Timmy' and his nurse Edith is reinforced in the novel by a convincing filling in of the background — that is, the Stasis Technologies, who undertake time 'grabs', and the various pressure groups who see Timmy as a symbol for their causes. The new element is the interaction of prehistoric tribes, for whom Timmy becomes more than a *deus ex machina*.

Child of Time works surprisingly well, given the relative flimsiness of the original plot line.

'The Ugly Little Boy' is one of the fifty stories collected in *The Asimov Chronicles*, now issued in a two-volume large-format paperback edition. They include stories from Asimov's first published story in 1939 through to 1988. There are eleven robot stories (Asimov will probably be best remembered for his Laws of Robotics and his 'Foundation' series) and four non-sf 'Black Widower' stories. The chance was lost, however, to make this a definitive collection — there are neither authorial comments from Asimov nor critical remarks from the editor Martin Greenberg. Nonetheless, the two volumes of *The Asimov Chronicles* provide a useful overview of the Asimov corpus of short stories.

Asimov continues to produce popular non-fiction at the same frenetic pace as he does fiction. *Asimov's Guide to Earth and Space* provides 111 short chapters in answer to Asimov's questions, such as 'How Was the Earth Formed?', 'What Are Stars?' and 'Will the Expansion of the Universe Continue Forever?' Asimov provides concise and easily understood answers to a pot-pourri of general scientific queries on Earth and space, making this *Guide to Earth and Space* very useful for school children, general science collections in public libraries, and interested general readers.

In *The Face of the Waters*, Robert Silverberg has created a water planet Hydras, where exiles from Earth struggle to survive against the myriad of marine life forms. Silverberg has termed it a 'sea adventure but more in the direction of Joseph Conrad than C. S. Forester'. The traumatic journey across the seas of Hydras by Silverberg's band of misfits also echoes Herman Melville. Their adventures become more than a rite of passage, however, when they confront the 'Fall of the Waters' and discover the true meaning of the planet.

Son of Man takes its hero Clay far into the future. First published in 1971, it is now regarded as Silverberg's most lyrical novel. It contains elements of the 1960s flower power culture as Clay embodies the whole history of the human race in his encounters with the exotic life forms into which humanity has evolved. Silverberg said recently that *The Face of the Waters* can be seen as 'driving for a transcendental conclusion which is somewhat of an outgrowth of my thinking in the early seventies'. *Son of Man* and *The Faces of the Water*, written some twenty years apart, are inextricably linked, and represent some of Silverberg's most creative writing.

D. G. Compton and John Gribbin: RAGNAROK (Gollancz; 344 pp.; A$34.95)

British writers Compton and Gribbin are usually known for their science fiction writing, but *Ragnarok* is essentially an 'eco-thriller'. A group of eco-terrorists threaten to explode a small nuclear device off the coast of Iceland. The explosion will plunge the world into nuclear winter from volcanic emission resulting from the interaction of molten rock with ice sea water. Their wish is to see the USA and Russia adopt disarmament and green policies.

Since this plot focus is revealed fairly early in the narrative, the tension derives from the usual will they? won't they succeed? question. And if they do, will the interaction of fire and ice result in a permanent northern hemisphere winter?

Compton and Gribbin maintain the tension skilfully, but in the end their message is the strongest feature of the novel.

Iain M. Banks: THE STATE OF THE ART (Orbit; 182 pp.; A$32.95)
Iain Banks: THE CROW ROAD (Abacus; 490 pp.; $A13.95)

Iain Banks was one of the overseas guests at Writers' Week in Adelaide in March 1992. He rocketed to fame in the United Kingdom with his first novel *The Wasp Factory* (1984), which has been reviewed by *The Financial Times* as being of 'quite exceptional quality', while *The Irish Times* described it as a 'work of unparalleled depravity'.

Some seven novels later, Banks still finds that a polarization of opinions prevails. Readers love or hate his writing. *The State of the Art* collects all of his work outside of his novels — seven short stories and a novella.

The opening story 'Road of Skulls' portrays the plight of two *Waiting for Godot* types doomed to travel eternally on the road containing the bizarre trophies of a galactic empire. 'Cleaning Up' reveals that human and alien bureaucracies have much in common, while 'Piece' is a

chilling combination of the Salman Rushdie affair and the Lockerbie disaster. Black humour, which underpins a lot of his work, Banks attributes to being a Scot.

Banks's major achievement in his three science fiction novels (written as Iain M. Banks, not Iain Banks) is the creation of the 'Culture', a sort of interplanetary utopian commune of shared but not defined governance. The Culture is merely represented in this selection by the title-story novella, which sees an observer sent to Earth circa 1977. While Earth is 'more dross than anything else' and is coldbloodedly allowed to remain so (which is why it is set in the past), Banks's detached observations provide a powerful view of our world, while the walk-on parts of characters such as Idi Amin and Richard Nixon are delightfully unexpected.

The State of the Art is not front-line Banks, but nevertheless a useful addition to his corpus of work. Of his mainstream novels, try *The Wasp Factory* or *Canal Dreams* (1989), in which a female Japanese cello player exacts revenge on her tormentors, or from the Culture series try *Consider Phlebas*. As Banks says about his books, if you're not committed to today's issues 'forget it; buy *The Sun* and watch *East Enders*!'

At an interview coinciding with Writers' Week, March 1992, Banks reflected on the fact that his literary output to date has been widely different in content and focus. 'I don't like repeating myself . . . I have a low boredom threshold and I transfer that totally arbitrarily onto my readership, such as it may be.'

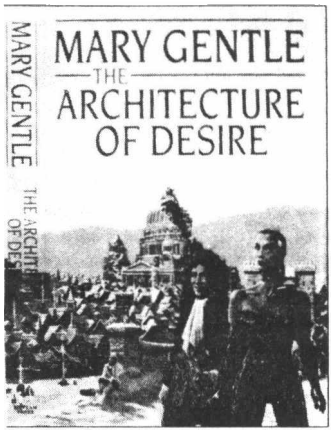
The Crow Road is probably the most conventional of his novels to date, despite its split chronology. It is essentially a warm black comedy of the lives, loves and deaths of a large middle-class Scottish family over the last 25 years seen through the eyes of a boy and then young man Prentice McHoan. The opening paragraph is typical of the narrative style and content: 'It was the day my grandmother exploded. I sat in the crematorium, listening to my Uncle Hamish quietly snoring in harmony to Bach's Mass in B Minor, and I reflected that it always seemed to be death that drew me back to Gallanach'.

It was, in fact, the grandmother's pacemaker that blew up in the crematorium of Prentice's home town of Gallanach. Crow Road is not only a street in the novel but also means dying, being dead — 'aye — he's away the crow road'. Lots of deaths occur, from the beautiful Fiona, killed in a sports-car accident, to the murder of Prentice's uncle Rory, found in the local loch many years after he had disappeared, but these deaths are juxtaposed with the delights of love and life.

Through it all, Prentice is 'growing, surrounded by your kin, you out-living some, some out-living you'. He reads history at university with mixed results, and falls in love with Ashley. Banks ponders whether life is simply 'a blink of flame like a match struck beside a search-light'? If it is, life in *The Crow Road* flares brightly indeed. Banks has returned to his home ground in a familiar novel told with panache.

Mary Gentle: THE ARCHITECTURE OF DESIRE (Bantam; A$29.95)
David Gemmell: DARK PRINCE (Legend; A$17.95)
Stephen King: THE DARK TOWER: THE WASTE LANDS (Sphere; A$17.95)
Stephen Jones and David Sutton (eds.): FANTASY TALES 7 (Robinson; A$10.95)
Martin Middleton: TRIAD OF DARKNESS (Pan; A$11.95)
David Eddings: THE SAPPHIRE ROSE (HarperCollins; A$32.95)
Katherine Kerr: A TIME OF EXILE (Grafton; A$32.95)
Simon Green: BLUE MOON RISING (Gollancz; A$38 hb; A$18 pb)
Alan Aldridge and Steve Boyett: THE GNOLE (Heinemann; A$19.95)
Lester del Rey and Rita Kessler (eds.): ONCE UPON A TIME (Century; A$19.95)

Mary Gentle is probably one of the least known but one of the most stimulating and provocative of the new young English writers. Decidedly her own voice, she mixes the quirkiness of Angela Carter with the inventiveness of Ursula Le Guin. *The Architecture of Desire*, her fourth novel, tells of a magical England of the mid-seventeenth century, where the Protector-General Olivia is opposed by the declining forces of



Queen Carola. The main character Valentine has to juggle her loyalties while indulging in personal vendettas. Real-life historical figures intermix with Gentle's characters, for whom astrology and alchemy are more normal than science.

Another alternative world picture, shown with less imagination but still vividly created, is found in David Gemmell's *Dark Prince*, which continues the story of Parmenion and Alexander the Great in Ancient Greece which began in *Lion of Macedon*. Easy to read, with colourful characters, Gemmell's book recounts how Alexander's 'dark side' evolves, and how the dual world creation allowed the whole pantheon of Greek mythology to emerge.

Stephen King's alternate Earth of a distant but bizarre future is the continuing backdrop for his Robert-Browning-inspired hero of *The Dark Tower: The Waste Lands*. Roland, 'the last gunslinger', seeks to find the Dark Tower at the 'nexus of time', but in between has to confront all manner of dangers that stand in his path — at the conclusion of this volume a riddle-loving malevolent artificial intelligence!

More dark fantasy can be found in the stories collected by Stephen Jones and David Sutton in *Fantasy Tales 7*, notably by Australian authors Trevor Donahue and Paul Collins, who demonstrate in 'The Unnamed' that suicide is no end to personal pain.

Australia, as children's authors have shown, can be utilized as a setting for effective fantasy. The second volume of Queensland author Martin Middleton's 'Chronicles of the Custodians' trilogy, *Triad of Darkness*, is, however, decidedly derivative of the British–American glut of stories bout young heroes with their mixed band of allies who oppose the

forces of darkness and in the process find themselves.

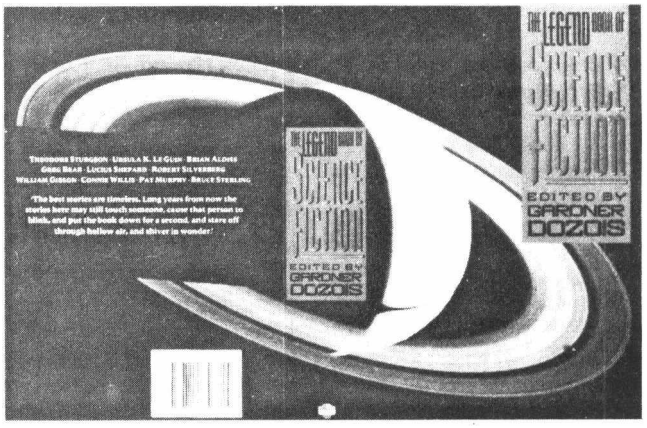
One of the best exponents of 'comfort' fantasy is David Eddings, whose *The Sapphire Rose* is the final volume of the 'Elenium' trilogy. The Pandion knight Sparhawk finally rescues the imprisoned young Queen Ehlana by means of the magical title jewel. While she is not as grateful as she might be, all ends more or less happily ever after for most concerned.

More earnest and packed with detail is Katherine Kerr's *A Time of Exile*, the first volume of her 'Westlands cycle', which interweaves the origins of fate of a half-elven ruler with the inhabitants of the land west of Deverry (the scene of some of Kerr's earlier books).

It is with some relief that one turns to Simon Green's *Blue Moon Rising*, which turns fantasy sagas on their head with unicorns without horns, a princess with a wicked left hook, and all sorts of zany fun. Green is not Terry Pratchett, but as a comic fantasy debut *Blue Moon Rising* is impressive.

Alan Aldridge was an artistic whiz kid of the 1960s, and in the 1970s produced *The Beatles Illustrated Lyrics* and *Butterfly Ball*, both of which were international bestsellers. His latest book, *The Gnole*, co-written with Steven Boyett, and profusely and imaginatively illustrated, is a clever marketing package aimed also at the movies. His creation Fungle is a Gnole, a thirty-inches-tall mammal with a human-like face and able to speak. Fungle has to save his forest, and then the world, so he is essentially a cuddly greenie, imbued with the Gaia theory, who takes on the establishment, not least the military. An unusual book, but perhaps too carefully planned as a commercial package.

Best-selling authors such as Isaac Asimov, C. J. Cherryh and Anne McCaffrey have combined in *Once Upon a Time*, to produce what the editors Lester del Rey and Rita Kessler term 'truly modern fairy tales for mature adult readers'. This is an impressive illustrated collection of ten stories, with Susan Dexter's 'Thistledown', about a unicorn and a dumb boy, and 'The Tinkling of Fairy Bells' by Katherine Kurtz, about a priest and a fairy, being particularly impressive.



Gardner Dozois (ed.): BEST NEW SCIENCE FICTION 5 (Robinson; 624 pp.)
Gardner Dozois (ed.): THE LEGEND BOOK OF SCIENCE FICTION (672 pp.; A$22.95)
John Clute (ed.): INTERZONE: THE FIFTH ANTHOLOGY (New English Library; 280 pp.; A$14.95)
David Barrett (ed.): DIGITAL DREAMS (New English Library; 347 pp.; A$11.95)
Isaac Asimov (ed.): THE MAMMOTH BOOK OF NEW WORLD SCIENCE (Robinson; 506 pp.; A$19.95)

Gardner Dozois is the doyen of American science fiction anthology editors. He has recently commented that short stories 'are where most of the really evolutionary work takes place in science fiction'. *Best New Science Fiction 5*, covering stories published in 1990, certainly reflects that trend, even if it is irritating that the British series continues to be numbered differently to the US edition (where it is the eighth of the *Year's Best SF* series).

The twenty-five stories provide an excellent snapshot of the year's output. Robert Silverberg depicts an greenhouse-effect eco-ravaged Earth in 'Hot Sky', while John Brunner's female character stumbles onto a sinister scientific research station experiment in rural Argentina in 'The First Since Ancient Persia'. Greg Egan is the only Australian represented, and the only one with two stories. One of them, 'The Caress', is a chilling description of future biomedical engineering and artistic madness.

Dozois' own *Legend Book of Science Fiction* collects twenty-six stories from the last thirty-five years solely based on those that had an impact on him as a reader. They are almost entirely American, but since the Americans seem to think they invented science fiction, that is perhaps understandable! There are some classics of the genre, such as Gene Wolfe's 'The Fifth Head of Cerberus' and Richard McKenna's 'Casey Agonistes', while relatively little-known but excellent pieces from Ursula Le Guin and cyberpunk maestro William Gibson are also included.

One source that Dozois uses for his *Year's Best* anthologies is the British magazine *Interzone*. Their fifth collection of material, which includes two original contributions, covers stories published in 1989 and 1990. *Interzone* is renowned for its discovery and cultivation of new authors — in this collection Richard Calder makes an impressive debut with 'Mosquito', whose plot revolves around the copying of Cartier 'living dolls' in Bangkok.

Digital Dreams is a collection of original British stories about computers and their effect, both present and future, on humanity. Terry Pratchett takes virtual reality to its ultimate conclusion, while Ray Girvan and Steven Jones warn in 'Lord of the Files' that black magic and computers should never mix.

Last and certainly least in this collection of paperback anthologies is *The Mammoth Book of New World Science Fiction*. Dozois has said 'when you publish fiction cynically with an idea that the audience are morons, you get a product fit for morons', and this falls into that category. The ten novellas collected in this anthology allegedly represent the 'new world' science fiction wave of the

1960s, but none of the authors represented except Roger Zelazny, an then with an inferior story, represent the 1960s literary pyrotechnics of Ballard, Moorcock and Spinrad, to name but three authors. Not one British author is represented for a movement that started in the UK, and the inclusion of run-of-the-mill authors such as Mack Reynolds and Keith Laumer makes a mockery of the collection's title. The lack of editorial comment, either to the volume or the authors, contributes to this blot on the usually excellent Robinson landscape.

Michael Cox and R. A. Gilbert (eds.): VICTORIAN GHOST STORIES (Oxford University Press; 497 pp.; A$39.95)
Valerie Martin: MARY REILLY (Black Swan; 222 pp.; A$12.95)
Stephen Jones and Ramsey Campbell (eds.): BEST NEW HORROR 2 (Robinson; 433 pp.; A$25)
David Sutton and Stephen Jones (eds.): DARK VOICES 3 (Pan; 317 pp.; A$11.95)
Campbell Black: THE WANTING (Mandarin; 307 pp.; A$10.95)
Dean R. Koontz: SHADOWFIRES (Headline; 590 pp.; A$12.95)

The Victorian era was a fertile one for writers of ghost stories. Cox and Gilbert adopt five criteria for the inclusion of stories in their Oxford University Press anthology. Each story should reveal to the reader a spectacle of the returning dead and their agents or their actions; a dramatic interaction between the living and the dead; literary quality; a definable Englishness; and brevity.

They begin their thirty-five stories in 1852 with Elizabeth Gaskell's 'The Old Nurse's Story' (also included in Richard Dalby's excellent *Virago Book of Victorian Ghost Stories*) and end in 1908 with Algernon Blackwood's 'The Kit-Bag'. The First World War and its greater horrors temporarily brought to an end the popularity of the ghost story — the 'pleasurable shudders', as Michael Sadleir has stated that they invoked. As Cox and Gilbert note in their excellent introduction, the domesticity and detail of Victorian ghost stories provided an ordered microcosm for the intrusion of the supernatural.

Women excelled in this form of writing, and the earlier Virago anthology highlighted the major role played by women writers such as Charlotte Riddell and Mrs Henry Wood, who are included in both anthologies. Amongst the male writers, Conan Doyle, Stevenson and Kipling represent the famous. The latter's 'At the End of the Passage' juxtaposes the heat, dust and loneliness of the Indian summer with the supernatural. Percival London's classic story 'Thurnley Abbey' also mixes East and West, as a retired Indian civil servant finds his inherited estate contains more than just bricks and mortar, and lives a 'waking nightmare'.

Oxford University Press timed the anthology to coincide with the United Kingdom 'yule and ghoul' atmosphere, but the stories bear reading any time of the year.

Robert Louis Stevenson's 'shilling shocker' *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886) is a masterpiece of Victorian horror, with its vivid portrayal of the dual nature of humanity. In *Mary Reilly*, Valerie Martin has superbly retold the story from the sympathetic perspective of an innocent maidservant. Mary's downstairs experience of the increasing disintegration of her household is superbly depicted, even though most readers will know the outcome.

The best of contemporary horror, that is of 1990, is collected in *Best New Horror 2* which, despite its dreadful cover, represents excellent value for money. In addition to the twenty-eight stories that verge more to dark fantasy than outright 'splatter', there are critical appendices by noted editors Jones and Campbell. Stories include K. W. Jeter's 'The First Time', recounting an unusual and gruesome coming of age in the sordid backrooms of a Mexican border town, and Melanie Tem's evocation of hidden horrors in a small neighbourhood play group in 'The Co-op'.

Jones teams up with David Sutton in the third of largely original horror series *Dark Voices*. Bob Shaw's suicide victim in 'A Real Downer' finds that his life does flash before his eyes, while Australian Robert Hood, who has won the *Canberra Times* short story competition, contributes a chilling piece on a family death and subsequent possession.

Less original are two middle-of-the-road horror novels from American writers Campbell Black and Dean R. Koontz. Black's *The Wanting* sees the quest for immortality cast a long-term shadow over a rural Californian community, while the current popularity of Koontz has seen the reissue of some lesser works written originally under the pseudonym Leigh Nichols. *Shadowfires* is a gory thriller about a genetic scientist who returns, in mutated form, from the dead to stalk his ex-wife.

It is argued that the coming of the electric light affected the plots of ghost stories. Certainly the muted terror of some of the Victorian ghost stories, as evil lurked in the shadows, is often preferable to the outright blood and gore of some of today's current crop of fictional 'terrorists'.

Arthur C. Clarke and Gentry Lee: THE GARDEN OF RAMA (Gollancz; 398 pp.; A$34.95)

Arthur C. Clarke's *Rendezvous with Rama* won a number of awards in 1973. It superbly evoked a sense of wonder arising from the arrival in the twenty-second century of a huge cylindrical, apparently empty, alien spaceship in our solar system. In *Rama Two* (1989) Clarke collaborated with American NASA scientist Gentry Lee to describe the impact of a second spaceship, but the sense of wonder disappeared as Lee's verbose descriptions of emotional domesticity took centre stage.

In *The Garden of Rama* that uneasy mix of soap and space still jars, but at least the long-awaited interaction with alien cultures allows Clarke's vision of a densely and strangely populated universe to become reality. The three human 'passengers' left on board at the end of *Rama Two* find, with their children, wonders indeed, but these fade rapidly when they return to our solar system to pick up two thousand colonists for a 'New Eden' to be created within the spaceship. No final resolution is reached (a fourth volume in the series is expected), except that humanity may well turn out to be the true aliens in the universe.

— Colin Steele, November 1990–March 1992

ALAN STEWART has recently returned to fulltime study, doing a Master's in Materials Science (Extractive Metallurgy), hoping to convert to a Ph.D. sometime in 1992. He edits *Ethel the Aardvark* for the Melbourne Science Fiction Club, and at the moment he is the Australian administrator of FFANZ and the chairperson of the Constantinople '94 national convention bid.

ALAN'S ALLEYWAY
Short reviews of sf and fantasy books

by Alan Stewart

FIREFLY by Piers Anthony
(Morrow 0 688 09705 7 hb; 1990; 384 pp.; US$18.95)

According to the cover blurb, with *Firefly* Piers Anthony has now moved into the horror field. Actually it's not very different in tone or setting from some of his other novels. Indeed, the main characters from his earlier *Shade of the Tree* make a cameo appearance in this story.

The 'monster' uses pheromones to attract its prey. This allows Anthony a broad range of sexual encounters, and a soap box to convey messages (preach) about his opinions on some of society's standards. In the Author's Note, he repeats everything that was obvious in the text.

Unfortunately, I can't even recommend this novel to Piers Anthony fans. There are no fun ideas or puns, which sustain his 'Xanth' and 'Adept' series. *Firefly* just takes another step along the 'serious socio-message' trail followed by his recent works. It's too drawn out; I can't swallow the Lamarckist theories; and the story is not interesting. If you must read Anthony, reread some of his earlier stuff.

THE QUEEN OF SPRINGTIME by Robert Silverberg
(Gollancz 0 575 04586 8 hb; 1989; 415 pp.; £13.95)

In this, the second volume of his latest far-future trilogy, Robert Silverberg continues the story of the People. Forty years after they emerged from the Cocoon in which they survived the Ice Age, they have built cities and prospered, but still need to be wary of the insect-like hjjk, who have proposed a treaty.

The Queen of Springtime is not as fresh as *At Winter's End*, the first volume in the series, but is still readable and enjoyable. It is easy to think of the People as human, except in appearance. Like Jean Auel's *The Valley of Horses*, this book gives a vivid sense of a particular people discovering a new world.

Recommended as a good solid read — nothing flashy or brilliant.

TO THE LAND OF THE LIVING by Robert Silverberg
(Gollancz 0 575 04496 9 pb; 1990; 308 pp.; A$9.95)

To the Land of the Living is a recent example of the old sf standby, the 'fix-up' novel. Three novellas are welded together: they appeared first in *Isaac Asimov's Magazine* and the *Heroes in Hell* anthology.

The extra you get with this volume is eighteen pages of bridging material and the last 96 pages of the novel. We find a portrayal of Gilgamesh and Enkidu, based on Silverberg's earlier *Gilgamesh the King*, plus the *Heroes in Hell* personae, such as Herod, Picasso and their ilk. This all makes the novel an awkward read, and confusing in isolation from the rest of the 'Hell' series.

To the Land of the Living suffers from the severe constraints of its construction. Any one of the original novellas works better alone.

DRINK DOWN THE MOON by Charles de Lint
(Ace 0 441 1681 2 pb; 1990; 216 pp.; US$3.95)

Drink Down the Moon continues Charles de Lint's series about the world of Faerie and its interaction with modern Ottawa. This story tells how the threat of a droichan, who drains luck from the world, is faced and overcome. It reads like a stand-alone novel, but just happens to include characters who have appeared in other de Lint novels. A search begins at the end of the novel, but at least it does indulge in a cliffhanger anti-climax conclusion.

The main characters are believable, with human problems and fears. Much is made of activities such as trekking or cycling across town. He makes a plausible link between the worlds of magic and the worlds of ordinary physical activity.

Enjoyable fantasy, with a touch of dark horror — good for a quick read on a train.

EXPECTING SOMEONE TALLER by Tom Holt
(Ace 0 441 22332 X pb; 1990; 231 pp.; US$3.95)

When Malcolm Fisher runs over a badger, he is unprepared to hear it talk, let alone hear it complain that it was 'expecting someone taller'. And as for bequeathing the Ring of the Nibelungs and mystical Tarnhelm, and their mastery of the world, to him with its dying breath. . . . Malcolm is off into a magical fantasy adventure whether he likes it or not.

Expecting Someone Taller is a funny, fast-paced story, with Mal-

colm going from one misadventure to another as he comes to terms with a new worldview. Surrounded and pursued by various Olde Gods and assorted creatures such as valkyries and Rhinemaidens, his adventures are entertaining. Mythical personae intrude and merge into the twentieth century, often with hilarious results.

This modern legend is more witty than other recent similar tales. Recommended.

THE FLEET 5: TOTAL WAR edited by David Drake and Bill Fawcett (Ace 0 441 24093 3 pb; 1990; 278 pp.; US$3.95)
THE FLEET 6: CRISIS edited by David Drake and Bill Fawcett (Ace 0 441 24106 9 pb; 1991; 294 pp.; US$4.50)

The battles of the Fleet continue, with fourteen authors contributing various encounters between veterans of the Khalian campaign and their new enemy, a spacefaring empire ruled by a Syndicate of families. Faced with superior technology, the Fleet's main weapons are human ingenuity and the fact that their quick defeat of the Khalia caught the Syndicate by surprise. But the interval has allowed Syndicate infiltration into the Alliance, reaching even the upper echelons of the Fleet itself.

Total War is an entertaining read, featuring familiar authors and characters from earlier volumes, plus new faces and styles. One new alien race is particularly gruesome, and the experimental APOT equipment continues to cause trouble.

The devisers of this series appear to have learned from the mistakes of other shared-world anthologies. Certainly they maintain a sense of continuity from book to book, but they also give some freedom to new writers and a breadth of story possibilities.

Contributors to *Crisis* include Poul Anderson, Mike Resnick and Chelsea Quinn Yarbro. The subject matter remains war, but most of the stories in this volume concentrate on the characters, the choices they face and the consequences of their actions.

'The Fleet' appears to be today's most entertaining shared-world anthology series. Recommended as good adventure hard sf, with some familiar authors turning out surprising tales.

PHAZE DOUBT by Piers Anthony (Ace 0 441 66263 3 pb; 1991; 324 pp.; US$4.95)

With *Phaze Doubt*, the seventh volume, Piers Anthony provides a conclusion to the 'Apprentice Adept' series — at least for the time being. With an alien race invading Phaze/Proton to exploit the now available magic, only a desperate attempt by the one free adept and help from an enemy can save the planet.

This book makes use of some elements from earlier books, such as the properties of the combined spheres (from *Unicorn Point*) and the fact that people can now change from their Proton to Phaze double at will. However, the plot elements that resolve the series have not been foreshadowed in earlier volumes.

Anthony's characterization is marginal, as usual. Only his variations on the Phaze/Proton theme make *Phaze Doubt* interesting. If you enjoyed the earlier books in the series, Anthony provides more of the same, without the annoying repetitions that marred *Robot Adept*. To enjoy *Phaze Doubt*, you will need to have read at least some of the earlier books in the series.

CLARKE COUNTY, SPACE by Allen Steele (Ace 0 441 11044 4 pb; 1990; 231 pp.; US$4.50)

In *Clarke County, Space*, set mainly in mankind's first orbiting space colony, Allen Steele tells a tale that includes an orbiting nuclear bomb; a call for Clarke County independence; the First Church of Twentieth Century Saints, their leader a reincarnated Elvis; a Mafia hit man; and a mysterious traveller.

An 'interview situation' text surrounds the rest of the story, providing a justification for the book's impossible number of coincidences. As told by the mysterious stranger, all these events had to happen as they did because he ensured they would. The journalist simply relays his tale, making no judgements.

Actual descriptions of the colony and its hardware seem reasonable extrapolations. The details sound right; it's only the plot that sounds unlikely, with its many neat plot twists and coincidences.

EALDWOOD by C. J. Cherryh (omnibus edition of THE DREAMSTONE and THE TREE OF SWORDS AND JEWELS) (Gollancz 0 575 04575 2 pb; 1991; 432 pp.; £4.50)

With this book Cherryh tries her hand at high fantasy in the Celtic tradition, borrowing creatures and names from the mythology but adding her own settings and events. It is a tale of the last of the elves, Arafel, and her interactions with the people who now surround her remaining kingdom of Eald. The style is typical Cherryh: straightforward events rather than instrospective characterization.

The work is entertaining enough — an unfolding account of various battles — and Cherryh is realistic enough to admit that good doesn't always win. *Ealdwood* is an interesting variation on Celtic myths, and should appeal to both fantasy and Cherryh fans.

BLIND JUSTICE by S. N. Lewitt (Ace 0 441 71843 4 pb; 1991; 265 pp.; US$4.50)

Blind Justice, Shariann Lewitt's third, tells of a French-speaking world being ground beneath the force of the militaristic interstellar Justica trading cartel. The hero, Emile Saint-Just, is press-ganged into making flights for the Justica. He discovers a way to begin a revolution against the oppressors.

In *Blind Justice*, the plot is less important than the descriptions of this nebula, the planet Beau Soleil and its city of Huit Fleurs. Ignore the plot, and enjoy the experience of reading this book.

BONE DANCE by Emma Bull (Ace 0 441 57457 2 pb; 1991; 279 pp.; US$4.50)

Emma Bull's latest novel is a mixture of post-nuclear holocaust setting, surviving mind-control personae ('horsemen') of the conflict, and the powers of tarot and hoodoo. In the middle of all this is Sparrow, a hustler specializing in pre-nuke videos, and his friends, enemies and powerful connections in a city struggling to survive. The destiny of the city will be decided by who gains control of energy sources; Sparrow becomes involved in this struggle.

Bone Dance changes perspective constantly. When you think you've

nailed down the true situation, Bull introduces extra levels of complication. Bull makes some intriguing suggestions about the possible shape of a post-holocaust society, but also introduces vague dealings with the spirit world. As an action novel this is enjoyable, but the whole seemed incredible.

THE SORCERESS AND THE CYGNET by Patricia A. McKillip (Ace 0 441 77564 0 hc; 1991; 321 pp.; US$17.95)

Patricia McKillip's latest fantasy is set in a strange world in which mortal interact with the constellations, and gods appear to assume physical forms. This world is one of Holdings, whose individual symbols become part of the tale; the Wayfolk, and the Wayman who makes a promise to a god; and the path taken to find a cygnet's heart.

The story is told in a straightforward way, but much is unexplained. The reader is never quite sure what this world is, or how it came to be, or how the events of the story will affect its future.

Overall *The Sorceress and the Cygnet* is entertaining, but the reader never quite feels that she or he has entered its world. I would like to see a longer work from McKillip, a book in which she gives herself the space to explain and develop her worlds.

BLUE MOON RISING by Simon Green (Roc 0 451 45095 7 pb; 1991; 477 pp.; US$4.99)

Faced with a big fat fantasy novel, complete with sword-wielding prince and princess, unicorn and dragon on the cover, I took it with me on an interstate flight. At least it isn't the first in a mega-trilogy. The front-cover blurb mentions a 'younger prince of a bankrupt kingdom who should have died a hero's death' while the back cover goes on about 'discover[ing] the things legends didn't tell'. But then the frontispiece describes the prince rescuing the dragon from the princess!

This mishmash of confusing signals continued as I read the novel. A serious fantasy or a satiric take-off of epic tales? Both, I realize. There's the usual stuff about a castle threatened by the forces of evil and a good prince who befriends goblins who help him in the end, but Simon Green also throws in a unicorn who christens doorposts when he's nervous, a missing south wing of the castle, and a Champion who knows when a lesson needs to be bloody well taught. In the end I decided this was a serious fantasy spiced with comedy.

The strength of *Blue Moon Rising* is that it involves you with the characters and the fantasy world itself. I suspect this book will remain a favourite long after many contemporary epic fantasies have vanished.

THE RUN TO CHAOS KEEP by Jack L. Chalker (Ace 0 441 69347 4 hb; 1991; 359 pp.; US$18.95)

The first 79 pages of this novel reintroduce the three 'teams' from *The Demons at Rainbow Bridge*, the set-up novel for the 'Quintara Marathon' series, and puts them into the alien artefact they are investigating. During the rest of the novel they chase, fight, and even kill each other in a desperate attempt to become the first to reach the final destination of the aliens that are ahead of them. By the end of this volume, they have only reached the fifth circle. Will the third novel spend much of its length recapping the events of the first and second?

Chalker offers tantalizing clues about the true nature of the quest, but genuine revelations will have to wait for future volumes. By the end of *The Run to Chaos Keep*, the original fifteen sapients are reduced in number. Chalker's habit of referring to characters by their species, rank or name, sometimes using two different terms in the same paragraph, makes it difficult for the reader to work out who's dead, injured or okay. The scope of the alien civilization has now greatly broadened; perhaps Chalker is becoming too ambitious in his aims for the whole series.

The Run to Chaos Keep stands reasonably well alone, but the reader would find it useful to read the first in the series for background on the nature of this galaxy and the psychic skills of its inhabitants. The book can best be summed up by the usual Chalker trademarks: fast action and shallow characters.

CHASE THE MORNING by Michael Scott Rohan (Morrow 0 688 08885 6 hc; 1991; 334 pp.; US$19.95)

A businessman effects a rescue in a seedy docklands, and enters a world that is not quite ours: a place where you can sail the airs of the earth, tread the rim where time runs strangely, and exist forever as a pirate.

Unfortunately for Rohan, it's all been done before. *On Stranger Tides* by Tim Powers has been into this territory, including the world of voodoo that dominates the last half of *Chase the Morning*. There have also been plenty of other novels about stepping through to alternate worlds. Rohan's novel is too reminiscent of other works to sparkle by itself.

The main characters don't invite affection; they seem like actors reading lines in a passionless play. The few original ideas get lost among the voodoo trappings. By the end, nothing much has happened: ho hum, so the hero gets his girl back. Not recommended.

REUNION by John Gribbin and Marcus Chown (Gollancz 0 575 04860 3 hb; 1991; 285 pp.; A$36)

Where would we be without jacket blurb writers? The blurb tells us that *Reunion*, written by the authors of *Double Planet*, is set 1000 years later. The book itself owes much of its atmosphere and suspense to the fact that the heroine is growing up in a society *not explicitly set on the Moon*, although the blurb tells us exactly what is going on. Subtle hints in the novel show the location of the adventures, which is meant to come as a surprise at the end.

The reader discovers important aspects of this society at the same time as do the main characters. We are free to speculate as we go along, but the authors spring a few surprises. This is a story more about human curiosity and scientific endeavour than emotions and love. The characters are there mainly to discover details of the world they live in.

Reunion is not a great book, but is successful in a limited way, building on the possibilities of the earlier *Double Planet*.

CHILD OF TIME by Isaac Asimov and Robert Silverberg (Gollancz 0 575 04699 6 hb; 1991; 302 pp.; £14.99)

With *Child of Time*, Silverberg and Asimov continue their run of 'collaborative expansions', that began in 1990 with *Nightfall*. In the new novel, Silverberg takes another Asimov short story — 'The Ugly Little Boy' — and turns it into a novel. The original story was about 40 pages long. The new text maintains the threads and ideas of Asimov's next-century tale, but adds eight interchapters (67 pages), set in the Neanderthal times from whence Timmy, the 'ugly' little boy, was plucked by a 'stasis field'.

This is little that is new or exciting to be found in the longer version. The most interesting events, involving nurse Edith Fellowes and Timmy, follow the same path as those of the original shorter work. Additional material gives background information about Stasis Incorporated's equipment and the unsuccessful applicants for Edith's job. There are no enlightening new insights into the human characters.

The additional prehistoric narrative contributes little to the novel, except to provide the set-up for a cutesy hope-filled ending. Perhaps Silverberg was using material he researched for such earlier works as *Mammoths and Man*. *Child of Time* is diluted, not enriched, by its extra material, and would fail to attract any reader who is familiar with the original story.

SOOTHSAYER by Mike Resnick (Ace 0 441 77285 4 pb; 1991; 279 pp.; US$4.50)

Using the galactic background of his earlier *Santiago*, Mike Resnick here tells part of the story of Penelope Bailey. She is rescued by Mouse, a petty thief, who becomes her friend and tries to protect her. Unfortunately Penelope is not the best person to know — she's a soothsayer who see possible futures and takes action to make sure that certain futures occur.

Mouse refuses to believe just how dangerous active precognition might be. Throughout *Soothsayer* Resnick explores the possibilities of Penelope's skill, showing us what it would mean to be a soothsayer, at both a personal and a galactic level. Penelope is a very manipulative person.

Soothsayer also tells of larger-than-life bounty hunters, tavern owners and entertainers, in a frontier-worlds story that has an entertaining over-the-top style. This is a fun book with a serious point of view.

THE OTHER SINBAD by Craig Shaw Gardner (Ace 0 441 76720 6 pb; 1991; 248 pp.; US$4.50)

This tale of the eighth voyage of Sinbad the Sailor can only be described as over the top. Accompanied by the Porter and assorted companions, he's doomed to repeat parts of all the previous seven voyages, usually the worst or most dangerous parts. These include giant Rukh birds, apes and a carnivorous two-headed cyclops, not to mention devious djinni, all appearing many times in a period of four days. You wouldn't give a fig (another threat, actually) for his chances. But Sinbad has ended up returning with riches to Baghdad seven times so far.

Not to be taken seriously, Craig Gardner's romp through the territory of the classic Sinbad saga is littered with bad puns, frantic activity, and a major catastrophe or rescue per page. Is all this necessary? *The Other Sinbad* is not as hilarious as some of Gardner's other works, such as the nearly 'Ebenexum' trilogy. It's fun reading, ideal for commuting time, as an awful lot happens in each short chapter.

THE WORLD AT THE END OF TIME by Frederik Pohl (Grafton 0 586 21275 2 pb; 1992; 407 pp.; A$11.95)

In alternating chapters, Frederik Pohl tells the story of a human and an alien living among the stars. By a combination of preservation by freezing and travel at relativistic speeds, the human can survive until the virtual death of the universe. The alien can survive this process because of what he is. Pohl tells the story of a interstellar human colony caught up in events outside its ken. As an aside, Earth is destroyed.

As usual, Pohl provides a very readable novel, but does not give it the tautness of an effective thriller. The alternating-chapter scheme breaks the flow of action. The hero/narrator Victor experiences time jumps because of the periods of freezing; these add to the jerky feeling of the book.

The World at the End of Time is a novel of ideas, about the possibilities inherent in relativity and quantum theory. Here is no in-depth microcosmic study of the human condition, but a book of hard sf about the fate of the universe.

This books feels similar to some of Pohl's earlier books, in particular *Starburst*. It probably won't gain him any new fans; recommended to Pohl completists, and to those who like their scientific ideas undiluted by human drama.

ALIEN BLUES by Lynn S. Hightower (Ace 0 441 64460 0 pb; 251 pp.; US$4.50)

Alien blues combines two stories: that of aliens assimilating into human society, and that of a homicide police officer. Either strand would have made a novel. Hightower combines them by telling of a murder investigation that uncovers a threat caused by human and Elakian (alien) greed. Life in the near future isn't nice for a lot of people, but there are still good guys like police officer David Silver to fight corruption and exploitation. Research into a new drug appears to be connected with serial killing, and Silver's private life is about to become part of the case.

Hightower makes *Alien Blues* into a rounded novel by concentrating on the details of people's lives. It does not really matter that the intricate threads of the murder investigation tie together too implausibly at the end, as Hightower shows both humans and Elaki as individuals with foibles and problems.

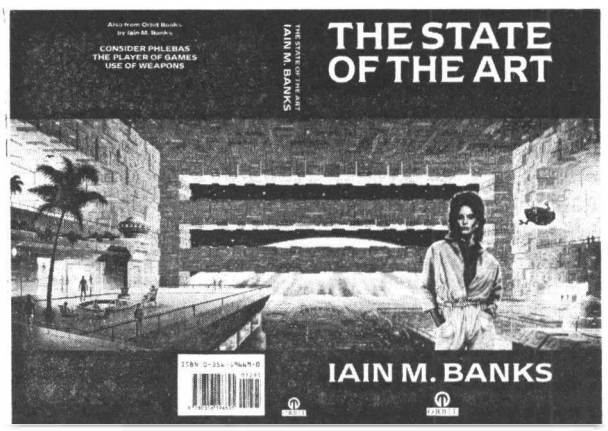
Alien Blues provides plenty of fast-paced action. Apart from the future-drug and alien themes, it finishes up as an effective police drama. Recommended, especially if this is the debut novel it appears to be.

— Alan Stewart, February 1991–April 1992

ANDY SAWYER earns my gratitude because until recently he was the only contributor to send me one of those little biographies I like to place at the beginning of these columns. Here it is: 'I'm currently thirty-eight, married to a college lecturer in Community Education, with two teenage daughters. I edit *Paperback Inferno* for the BSFA. I'm a librarian by trade, currently working as a children's librarian, and a writer/reviewer by obsession, mainly, though not exclusively, for the BSFA and British fanzines. For my M. Phil. degree I wrote a dissertation on the works of Jacobean playwright/pamphleteer Thomas Dekker, who also helped considerably in my first professional fiction sale last year, a story in an anthology called *Digital Dreams* (NEL). In my spare time I like to listen to anything by REM as loud as I can get it, and I still think Richard Thompson is one of the great men of the guitar. I've never been to Australia, but during my teenage years I flew on several QANTAS flights as far as Hong Kong.'

SAWYER'S LOG

by Andy Sawyer



Paul J. McAuley: THE KING OF THE HILL AND OTHER STORIES (Gollancz 0 575 05001 2; 1991; 216 pp.; £13.99)

Although I've enjoyed Paul J. McAuley's stories in *Interzone*, and thought a lot of his first novel, *Four Hundred Billion Stars*, it's only after reading this collection that I'm struck by what a *good* writer he is. There's a depth and versatility to his story-telling that can be overlooked in the process of reading him one tale after another over a period of months or years, but which becomes obvious when experienced in a collection over a short period.

The first stories, 'King of the Hill' and 'Karl and the Ogre', hark back to the far past, although they are both set in the future; the title story in a near-future Britain invaded by US troops safeguarding their military bases, and the second a far future where genetic change has created a more significant environmental metamorphosis. 'King of the Hill' recalls the legend of Arthur, with the narrator's young nephew cast in a potentially Arthurian role as the old gods save their native landscapes. 'Karl and the Ogre' goes even further back, to a fairy-tale world of nature spirits created by the 'changelings' with their mental powers.

'Transcendence' is a fairly conventional hard sf tale of — well — transcendence, set on a credibly imagined Venus, but there's another dynamic temporal flow in 'The Temporary King' that sets a pastoral society living a medievally 'noble savage' life almost in the shadow of a vast technologically advanced starfaring civilization.

The following stories appear to be set in the same universe, with 'Exiles' showing the characters living through an apocalyptic historical event, and from here a kind of progression becomes apparent, with McAuley weaving a kind of chain through his stories. 'Little Ilya and Spider and Box' mentions anti-ageing drugs that are given more emphasis during the plot of 'The Airs of Earth' (in which a character refers to the events of the previous story). 'The Airs of Earth', finally, casts back to the past with classical Greek references, and at the same time suggests some forthcoming religious/cosmic event.

McAuley's stories are reminiscent of those of early Aldiss in their elegiac glimpses of a far future. He often draws back the curtain to reveal glimpses of strangeness in a world more detailed than the individual stories give: 'The bears can be dangerous. They speak a kind of American, but it isn't much like ours' ('The Temporary King'). There is just enough hinted about the background to the 'Witness' cult in 'The Heirs of Earth' to make them far more than just the stock religious fanatics necessary for the plot. Like all good story-tellers, the author gives the impression that he knows more than he is telling. *The King of the Hill* is a superb collection by one of the major talents of the nineties.

Iain M. Banks: THE STATE OF THE ART (Orbit 0 356 19669 0; 1991; 182 pp.; £12.95)

This isn't the novella published in the USA by Mark V. Ziesing — or rather it is, but packaged with some extra short stories to follow Orbit's stylish issues of Banks's novels *Consider Phlebas*, *The Player of Games* and *Use of Weapons*. 'The State of the Art' is by far the longest piece here, and sets the pace for the rest. Although by no means everything else is related to its 'Culture' background (only one other story specifically refers to the Culture, though two others might take place in the same universe), it's Banks's hedonimperialistic utopia that is the touchstone for the book, which has a cover illustration that recalls not

only 'The State of the Art' but *Use of Weapons* (which shares two characters).

Although some of the other stories, such as 'Scratch' and 'Piece', are more akin to the work of Iain without-an-initial Banks, their tone — sardonic humour, passionate defence of liberty and verbal and imagistic absurdity — is by no means divorced from the more science-fictional stories.

Fay Weldon, who once described Banks as 'the great white hope of British literature', has recently said about this quote on the covers of Banks's sf books: 'but sf readers aren't particularly interested in British literature, nor should be, and vice versa, so what's the point?' The point is that Banks is not slumming in sf, that the qualities that make his non-sf writing brilliant are precisely those that illuminate his sf, and most of his non-sf (however non-) could not have been written without a thorough grounding in sf: check the jokes in *Walking on Glass* or *The Bridge*. From another perspective, I could even argue that much of *The State of the Art* could be Banks-without-the-M and that it isn't 'real' sf anyway but moral fable or fits some such literary structure. But that would be a pack of lies. . . .

Both of the overtly 'Culture' stories show how misfits can find even the most wonderful utopia a thorn in the flesh. Banks keeps *telling* people about how much he would like to live in the Culture; he keeps writing about how difficult it would be.

'The State of the Art' compares the perfect stability of the Culture with Earth, 1977; a 'compare and contrast' exercise about a member of a Culture investigative team fascinated by Earth's savagery and change fixation as opposed to what he sees as the Culture's smug stasis/sterility.

Wrobik, in 'A Gift from the Culture', finds himself (herself) disenchanted for much the same reasons, bored with the hypocrisy of Culture evangelism but finding that dropping out is a matter of accepting the pain involved with moral choices. As was Zakalwe in *Use of Weapons*, Wrobik is manipulated by forces dedicated to achieving change by violent means, but just what are the ultimate goals of these forces and who, indeed, ultimately are they?

'Descendant' and 'Cleaning Up' show Banks's fascination with gadgetry (a sentient suit; a galactic-wide disposal unit) and what happens when it is damaged or decides to go wrong in the way that complex technology often does. 'Piece', in its ironic interweaving of coincidence, takes some of the moral questions of the 'Culture' sequence and returns them to the world of *The Satanic Verses* and international terrorism.

'Scratch' — as its title suggests — applies to narrative prose techniques of contemporary music-making. It's the most adventurous piece of prose in the book, but not the most inaccessible.

Banks is probably the best straightforward science fiction author writing today, his gifts underlined by the fact that he writes considerably more than science fiction. His ironic horror and ferocious humour are probably the reason why he, more than anyone else, has made space opera respectable once more; he has given it more than slambang adventure and slapstick but quite savage moral probings.

In itself, the story 'The State of the Art' has much of the moral tract about it, which is why, I think, it doesn't *quite* work alone. It needs (and is given by the author) the ironic footnotes provided by 'The Drone' and the everyday absurdities of shipboard life to counterpoint the heavy satire of Linter's fascination with Earth. And more, it needs what the reader should bring to it, the experience of having read the other three 'Culture' books to offer background and depth. But not *quite* working in these terms is considerably more than many a work of acclaimed brilliance, and this is another Iain (M.) Banks book. Enough said.

(*brg* The significance of Banks's middle initial remains a deep metaphysical British joke that hasn't quite penetrated here yet. Iain Banks, M. or non-M., was a guest of the Adelaide Arts Festival's Writers' Week in March 1992, so obviously somebody in Adelaide noticed Fay Weldon's blurb on the book covers. *)

George Beahm (ed.): THE STEPHEN KING COMPANION (Macdonald, £13.95)
Tim Underwood and Chuck Miller (eds.): FEAR ITSELF: THE HORROR FICTION OF STEPHEN KING (1976–1982) (Pan, £4.99)

Stephen King is the mass market's horror writer, and among the millions who send his books soaring into bestsellerdom are many who would welcome a book like *The Stephen King companion*: a 'resource guide' and reference work for King fans. It's not just one of the increasing number of scholarly works or studies (Beahm lists twenty-one of these, plus eight forthcoming) but one that would serve as an invaluable guide for anybody planning one. It is also rewarding for fans.

Some of the material, such as the *Playboy* interview, is well known, but the *Companion* brings together from various sources stuff you'd have to put a lot of detective work into tracking down. There are insights into King himself: interviews with and talks by The Man, and critical comment by other writers, including Harlan Ellison's perceptive 'he is as honest a popular writer as we've been privileged to experience . . . he does the one job no writer may ignore . . he *delivers*.'

We get information about, listings and synopses of books, films and audio versions of King's work. As a spin-off, the *Companion* is the best general guide to the US fantasy/horror specialty press that I've seen. It covers published work up to and including *The Tommyknockers* (including limited editions such as *My Pretty Pony* and *Cycle of the Werewolf*) and looks at early, unpublished work (although it's somewhat reticent about the Bachman books).

Contributions are variable: the 'over 100 articles' proudly proclaimed range from long interviews and critical pieces to one-sentence quotes. There's a King trivia quiz, and a story by King of how he had his photograph taken with a number-one fan: one Mark Chapman. Cree-*py*! Contenders for number-one-fandom will get off on this stuff; obsessive collectors will find the sections on the *Castle Rock* newsletter, the specialist press listings, and the price guide to first editions essential, and the serious readers who enjoy King without worrying too much about the colour of his socks will appreciate the insights into and background behind the stories.

If you can't afford the £13.95 for the *Companion*, the Underwood/Miller collection will give you a great deal for the price although, as it dates from 1982, be prepared to find a lot of the bibliographical material outdated — for example, *It* is described as 'a very long way from publication'.

Fear itself is more a collection of

essays on aspects of King's work, with contributors such as Chelsea Quinn Yarbro, Bill Warren, Fritz Leiber, and Charles L. Grant writing on such topics as movie adaptation, the influence of other horror writers on King, parallels with traditional fairy tales in his writing, etc. It's probably better than the *Companion* for essay-type coverage, but not nearly as comprehensive: buy it for yourself, but put the *Companion* on your Christmas/birthday list immediately.

Tom Holt: FLYING DUTCH (Orbit 0 356 20111 2; 1991; 252 pp.; £12.95)

Take your position in the "Mastermind" chair, and your special subject is humorous fantasy writers. Which writer of humorous fantasy has his cover illustrations done by Josh Kirby and lives in Somerset?'

Wrong

The answer is Tom Holt.

One suspects, though, that there's a certain amount of editorial latching on to the coattails of that *other* humorous fantasy writer from Somerset whose books are illustrated by Josh Kirby, which is unfair to Tom Holt because he doesn't need the comparison — subliminal or otherwise — with Terry Pratchett.

Holt shares with Pratchett a fondness for wicked one-liners and essentially innocent characters in ridiculous situations, but instead of the brilliantly shambolic construction of the Discworld, Holt prefers to sneak his humour into the contemporary world by means of intrusions from the world of myth and legend. His first book in this vein was *Expecting Someone Taller*, which showed us the truth behind the gods and heroes of Wagner's 'Ring' cycle. *Who's Afraid of Beowulf?* brought the last Norse king of Caithness (not to mention two chthonic spirits playing an everlasting and irritatingly complex game) to modern London. *Flying Dutch* introduces us to Cornelius Vanderdecker, the Flying Dutchman, whose story is considerably stranger than the legend (and Richard Wagner) would have us believe.

All that stuff about curses is just romantic exaggeration. What we're really talking about is *side effects*.

Vanderdecker, an accountant named Jane, and Danny Bennett (the tv director we met in *Beowulf*) are involved with events that undermine the entire global economic system. Just suppose, for instance, that a life insurance policy taken out in the sixteenth century became due? And if you were an alchemist seeking to duplicate an elixir, what else would you need to invent along the way?

Holt gives us some unlikely but amusing snippets of historical information and the history of science, and keeps us entertained along the way. His humour satisfies the first law of odd fantasy in that it keeps us awake, but it has to be said that his plotting is unsurprising. (Hint: don't read *Flying Dutch* too soon after *Who's Afraid of Beowulf?*) Opera fans will find much to raise a smile.

Memo to Orbit Books: forget the Josh Kirby covers and market Holt as an alternative to Pratchett, not another one.

Craig Shaw Gardner: THE OTHER SINBAD (Headline 0 7472 0285 0; 1991; 277 pp.; £13.95)

This has a Josh Kirby cover and one of the subsidiary characters is an ape that goes 'ook'. Apart from that, any resemblance to a Terry Pratchett novel is faint indeed. Craig Shaw Gardner is a prolific writer of 'humorous' fantasy. This is an attempt to write a rollicking version of the *Arabian Nights*, with Sinbad the porter embarking on an *eighth* voyage. And that's when the *real* fun begins . . . except that in this case it doesn't, in a heavy-handed send-up that is less 'rollicking' than — well, a load of old rollocks.

Terry Pratchett: REAPER MAN (Gollancz 0 575 04979 0; 1991; 253 pp.; £13.99)

Terry Pratchett's going to have to watch it. He's writing proper novels.

Halfway through *Reaper Man* I found that I wasn't reading a series novel about funny characters in silly situations but a novel with a complex, layered structure about characters I cared about illustrating an important philosophical point.

There, that scared you, didn't it?

Oh, there are plenty of jokes — the agoraphobic bogeyman, the militant Dead Rights activist, the burbling street-gang ejaculations of the Wizards as they psych themselves up to combat yet another threat to the stability of Ank-Morpork and the reader's ribs. But the parallel stories of Death, made redundant by his mysterious superiors, and Windle Poons, ex-wizard and now Undead until Death's replacement gets his act together, end up with both characters learning a lot about people and being needed in little acts of poignancy. The final message is bleak but stoical; death is inevitable but necessary, and life can be a bit of a bitch too, but caring can lighten the burden.

Terry Pratchett has never written stories that are *just* sequences of slapstick, but recent books have shown a sharper edge to his satire, and there's certainly a sharp edge here. On Page 132, to be precise.

The action jerks from strand to strand, culminating in a pair of set-piece confrontations, each with its moving coda. I do register a professional complaint about the vitalism shown by the University's Librarian, who refuses to let Poons consult a book on the flimsy excuse that he's dead. That would rule out half the customers of the average suburban branch library.

The dust jacket says that Pratchett 'occasionally gets accused of literature'. Here ends the case for the prosecution.

J. Michael Straczynski: OTHERSYDE (Headline 0 7472 0375 X; 310 pp.; £14.95)

This is the one about a new kid moving to a new school where the only classmate prepared to be friends is the class wimp — who then becomes the willing tool of a force that gives him the power to revenge himself on whoever has crossed him. It's hardly the most original plot, but the theme of the attraction of being able to use supernatural means to get your own back on bullies everywhere is appealing to paranoids everywhere who've put up with parents, teachers, classmates . . . in short, all of us who either are or remember what it was like to be teenagers. The deep moral question, of course, is how far you succumb to this temptation, and this is probably less emotionally charged here than in, for instance, Mark Morris's *Toady*, but it can't be denied that the story is told well.

— Andy Sawyer, February–July 1991

brg As usual, here are some short reviews of fiction read since *SFC* 69/70 appeared. The books fit the categories of 'science fiction', 'fantasy' or 'books of interest to sf and fantasy readers'. I begin with the books I like most, and dribble down the list until I hit those best described as 'okay, but it's your money'. If I have room at the end of the column, I get stuck into the stinkers. If I don't mention *your* book, you will never know whether I didn't like it or didn't have time to read it.

THE GILLESPIE REPORT:
Short reviews

by Bruce Gillespie

ONLY BEGOTTEN DAUGHTER
by James Morrow
(Morrow 0 688 05284 3; 1990; 312 pp.; US$19.95, A$28.50)

I can't describe this book, so I'm grateful for the following written by John Clute in *Interzone* 55, January 1992, which arrived this morning: '*Only Begotten Daughter* is a fable about the life of the sister of Jesus, whose name is Julie Katz; who was born in an ectogenesis machine in New Jersey in 1974 to a Jewish sperm-donator, a desperately nice fellow who dies of heart failure later on; who grows up capable of performing miracles, though her father persuades her not to; who is forced into action by fundamentalist Reverend Milk's assault on Atlantic City, which seems likely to burn the place to the ground . . . It is funny, impassioned, decent, concerned and rakish. That is good.' Clute has doubts about the book, because the characters seem too nice. I suppose so; but no more nice than other people I know who find the world hard going. Would Julie Katz stay nice if her earthly father had not persuaded her to hold the tidal waves each time she got annoyed? What is *not* nice is the world Julie Katz lives in — a world designed to crush people of goodwill, and most of the others as well. It's our world, a few years hence. Clute says that *Only Begotten Daughter* fails 'to bite into the great rotten apple of the world'. *I* say that Morrow's frenetic rhetoric, dancing speech rhythms and daring command of fantastic and religious metaphors enables him to skewer the world, material and otherworldly, to its core. Julie has a look at the afterlife. There is no comfort there; only four people have ever been judged worthy of heaven, so everybody else, including Julie's 2000-year-old brother, burns forever in hell. This terrestrial life is as good as it gets! Clute finds this nice and comforting?

I keep hoping someone will write me a long essay that will explore this book's intricacies, games and dilemmas. *Only Begotten Daughter* is a funny, ferocious torrent of words that leaves the reader exhausted and exhilarated, certain only of one truth: that only great fantasy can tell great truths about our lives.

IN THE FIELD OF FIRE
edited by Jeanne Van Buren Dann and Jack Dann (Tor 0 812 53487 5; 1987; 416 pp.; US$4.95/A$7.95)

How do you write a book of fantasy and science fiction stories set during the Vietnam War? This seems a ridiculous premise, despite the fact that the War always seemed surreal to onlookers. Yet the authors featured in this book have risen to the challenge, contributing a memorable original-fiction collection. The book's great strength is that it is not an anti-war (or pro-war) book. Each of the authors has taken the premise that under the unique stress of the Vietnam War, participants may have undergone unique, fantastical experiences. These range from John Kessel's 'Credibility' (the main character's entire war takes place only in his mind) to Dave Smeds' 'Goats' (bored soldiers practising artillery become affected by ancient magical forces) to Bruce McAllister's 'Dream Baby' (the war was a theatre for unique, cruel psychological experiments; the story has now been extended into a novel) to tales of extreme stress in jungle conditions (Craig Kee Strete's 'The Game of Cat and Eagle' and Lucius Shepard's 'Shades'). Brian Aldiss ('My Country, 'Tis Not Only of Thee') begins with a grimly humorous premise — that the Vietnam War might has as well have been staged in a Britain divided between north and south — and ends in violent realism. Congratulations to editors Jeanne and Jack Dann.

BLOOD IS NOT ENOUGH: 17 TALES OF VAMPIRISM
edited by Ellen Datlow (Morrow 0 688 08526 1; 1989; 319 pp.; US$19.95, A$28.50)

Vampirism? A bit old hat as a subject? Not to Ellen Datlow. If vampires with black capes and shiny upper fangs are a bore, then change the vampires. Which is mainly what happens in the best of these stories. Who would have thought that the Walrus and the Carpenter were actually vampires? Gahan Wilson, of course (in 'The Sea Was Wet as Wet Could Be'). Or that Pat Cadigan's 'pathosfinders' (from her novel *Mindplayers*) could become mind vampires under certain circumstances ('Dirty Work')? Most extraordinary is Scott Baker's 'Varicose Worms', a story of shamanistic 'vampirism', extreme paranoia, and

an obsessiveness rivalled only by that found in Stanislaw Lem's classic story 'The Mask'. Baker's story is a masterpiece of compression and truly nasty nastiness. Complete with the new classic story 'Carrion Comfort' (Dan Simmons), *Blood Is Not Enough* is a very satisfying anthology.

SLEEPING IN FLAME
by Jonathan Carroll (Legend 0 09 957540 X; 1989, originally published 1988; 244 pp.; £3.50, A$9.95)

Elsewhere in this issue, I've written about the novels of Jonathan Carroll without discussing any individual works other than *The Land of Laughs*. Of the other novels, *Sleeping in Flame* works best on its own terms, although it is linked with the other novels of the late 1980s. For instance, it contains a more detailed portrait of the shaman Vanesque than we find in the other books. *Sleeping in Flame* is the story of a rather careless yuppie named Walker Easterling who, like most Carroll characters, finds his world crashing in on him just at the time of greatest happiness — falling in love with Maris York. Somebody, or some thing, in Vienna doesn't like him, or doesn't want him to be happy. Supernatural events and dreams ricochet around his head. In California, he begins his quest to find out who he 'really' is, but his shaman Vanesque dies. Then things get worse. Eventually Easterling thinks he has solved the problem of his supernatural ancestor; hence the last few paragraphs of the book are nasty and funny. As usual with Carroll, the book is really about story-telling, which works because the author is one of the great story-tellers.

TIME AND CHANCE
by Alan Brennert (Tor 0 312 93192 1; 1990; 281 pp.; US$17.95, A$25.50)

Here is a fantasy premise as slim as that used by Jack Finney in *Time and Again* — but Brennert has Finney's ability to put flesh and landscape onto his idea. Through strictly mysterious means, a man changes place with his *alter ego*, the man he would have been in some other slightly different world. Richard Cochrane, a man of the theatre, thinks he would have been happier if he had never left the small town in which he grew up. Equally discontented Rick Cochrane, from the small town, suddenly gains the chance to try out the theatre world. Overall, the results are predictable. In fine detail, every move is a delight. It's plain that Brennert knows his theatre world better than he knows small-town America, but he brings both men completely to life. Brennert is an Author To Watch — I've already bought his book of short stories, but haven't had time to read it yet.

THE ARCHITECTURE OF FEAR
edited by Kathryn Cramer and Peter D. Pautz (Avon 0 380 70553 2; 1987; 278 pp.; US$3.95)
WALLS OF FEAR
edited by Kathryn Cramer (Morrow 0 688 08967 4; 1990; 395 pp.; US$19.95)

Since *Walls of Fear* is the sequel to *The Architecture of Fear*, one can see that *Architecture* did fairly well. I'm pleased about that. Since many satisfactory collections of sf or fantasy stories (*Light Years and Dark* and *Strangeness* come to mind immediately) disappear without trace, it's pleasant to find a collection of remarkable new stories doing well.

Both *The Architecture of Fear* and *Walls of Fear* are sold as books of haunted-house stories. This genre can be limiting, but in the past it has provided some of the most memorable stories in the language (Edmund Wilson's 'Ellen Terhune' and Henry James's 'The Turn of the Screw', and many others). The editors of *The Architecture of Fear* were obviously looking for stories given scope by the genre, rather than limited by it.

Scott Baker is an author I've just discovered. Where does one find, for instance, 'The Lurking Duck' and 'Still Life with Scorpion', both mentioned by the editors in the story's blurb? In 'Nesting Instinct' (*Architecture*), an American woman knowing no one in Paris is offered digs in a house that is a round tower. She is left in a top-floor room while the previous tenant flees. During the story, the woman is captured by the room and the tower. The process of capture is subtle, even amusing, but horrifying as well. The only story that has the same kind of enveloping fascination is Thomas Disch's masterpiece 'The Asian Shore'.

Robert Aickman died in 1981, but he left behind 'The Fetch', perhaps his finest story. It is essentially the story of a boy growing up in a very repressed household. He and his mother are very close, until the family ghost seems to take her away. The boy wrongly thinks that the ghost is part of the family's London house. Only when he inherits a forbidding Scottish 'fetch' does he find out what kills members of his family or drives them mad. 'The Fetch' is a great example of that finest of prose forms, the novella.

Most of the other stories use haunted houses as places in which authors can come to terms with their deepest experiences. My own favourites include Ramsey Campbell's 'Where the Heart Is', Charles L. Grant's 'Ellen, in Her Time', Jack Dann's 'Visitors', and Jessica Amanda Salmonson's 'The House that Knew No Hate'. Gene Wolfe's 'In the House of Gingerbread' is a cruel but deft joke, and Michael Bishop's 'In the Memory Room' is both very funny and tender. This is the best 'what if?' story in the collection.

Walls of Fear seems lightweight compared to *Architecture*. There are more stories that rely on the clichés of the haunted house genre ('Tales from a New England Telephone Directory' seems a particularly disappointing story from a writer as able as James Morrow). There are more stories that are merely one-line jokes. But there are also several very fine stories. M. J. Engh's 'Penelope Comes Home' shows that this author can still write as well as she did in her novel *Arslan*. This is the story of an innocent-looking midwestern house that haunts from a distance. The main characters try to maintain that distance, until, as the title puts it, Penelope eventually does come home. Another fine example of the novella form.

Walls of Fear also features Gene Wolfe's 'The Haunted Boarding-house', which shows that, despite the evidence of his recent novels, Wolfe still can write amazingly well. Since I have little idea what actually happens in this story (and suspect that the main character is dead from shortly after its beginning), I can say that the prose style makes a mountain of what might otherwise be a collection of molehills. Gwyneth Jones's 'Grandmother's Footsteps' and Susan Palwick's 'Erosion' are the other highlights of *Walls of Fear*.

STALLION GATE
by Martin Cruz Smith
(Collins Harvill
0 00 222727 4; 1986;
287 pp.; £10.95, A$24.95)
GORKY PARK
by Martin Cruz Smith
(Ballantine 0 345 29834 9;
1982, first published 1981;
433 pp.; US$3.95, A$5.95)

Martin Cruz Smith is an interesting bestselling author who is interested in many of the same things that interest sf and fantasy authors, but so far he has not stepped into genre territory.

Gorky Park, less interesting than its publicists claim, is a brave attempt to depict an alien culture — that of metropolitan USSR in the late 1970s. I don't think it works, because Arkady Renko comes across as a painfully upright American cop in heavy disguise, rather than the cynical outsider Russian cop he is supposed to be. The book is really all about late seventies America, a point made clear when Renko ends up in New York, only to see American society through alien eyes. The book's final shoot-out scene is strictly out of 1980s Hollywood.

Much better is Smith's next novel, *Stallion Gate*. Stallion Gate is the native American territory in Arizona that is now famous as Trinity, the site of the first explosion of an atomic weapon in 1945. Smith tells the story of the building of the atomic bomb from the viewpoint of those most immediately affected by the project — the tribespeople who were dispossessed to make way for the explosion. Smith goes further than the historians — his story asserts that the boffins we all know as the 'builders of the bomb' were so rent by self-doubt and paranoia that they could not have finished it without the help of people like Sergeant Pena — an Amerindian who doesn't give a stuff about the Japanese, the bomb, or the Russians, but merely wants to make enough money to live comfortably after the end of the war. Pena becomes the vital neutron burrowing in from the chaotic pattern of people around him, the one practical person who makes the explosion possible. Especially memorable is the sequence in which a small group of servicemen ride with the plutonium bomb over the roughest roads in the state, delivering it (but not them) safely. *Stallion Gate* is an exciting, ironic and highly patterned fable about the making of the modern world.

BRAIN CHILD
by George Turner
(Morrow 0 688 10595 5;
1991; 407 pp.; US$20,
A$28.50)

I feel that I have read two different books by George Turner — a manuscript called 'Nursery Games' and a book now called *Brain Child*. (George keeps hoping that someone sometime will revert to his own title.) My impression of the manuscript that it read like a fast-paced thriller about super (or at least alternative) humanity, but suffered from a cumbersome, too-long ending. My impression of the published novel is that it begins very slowly, rides its roller-coaster from about page 200, and has its ending a coda that now seems appropriate. George assures me that he took notice of my suggestions about the manuscript, but actually made few changes. About the published version of *Brain Child* I can add little to Wynne Whiteford's review in this issue of *SFC* or Russell Letson's effusive review in a recent issue of *Locus* ('[In] the collision of the extraordinary and the ordinary, what we are directed to examine is less the superhuman (which we can never entirely or surely grasp) than our own humanity'). Its theme is not as all-encompassing as that of *The Sea and Summer*, but Turner seems to get better and better at writing bitter thrillers based on the ironic implications of accepted scientific and social ideas.

YES, LET'S: NEW AND SELECTED POEMS
by Tom Disch
(Johns Hopkins University Press; 0 8018 3835 5; 1989;
112 pp.; A$23.95)

This is what is known as a 'marginal item'. Only one poem ('A Vacation to Earth') refers even slightly to sf or fantasy. This is not even Tom Disch's most recent collection of poetry (I haven't been able to track down the latest yet). But it *is* a retrospective of Disch's career in poetry, plus some new items, and its style will appeal to all those who love Disch's fiction. My favourite poem is 'Swimming': 'I paddle forward, slow / as a disabled steamboat, slow / as the clock on the swimming / pool wall. A will tow- / ing a whale. Ten laps and I'm beyond / caring what my laboring breath / sounds like.' Right on, Tom. I'm glad there's somebody else in the world who cannot swim fifty laps without stopping.

THE EMBEDDING
by Ian Watson
(VGSF Classics No. 44,
0 575 04784 4; 1990, first published 1973; 254 pp.;
£3.99, A$11.99)

The Embedding is one of those few genuine sf 'classics': books that gave a real sense of novelty and excitement when released, and continue as yardsticks for the rest of the field. It was Watson's first novel; it seemed to explore the cutting edge of early 1970s linguistics and politics; it had passion, grace and fire. It still does — but I suspect its reputation has faded with Watson's inability to produce a convincing novel since (though, to be fair, some of his short stories have been very good). *The Embedding* is a fine example of intense, exploratory writing on the borders of incomprehensibility; nice to see it reprinted by Gollancz in paperback.

VOICE OF OUR SHADOW
by Jonathan Carroll
(Arrow 0 09 937780 2;
1984, first published 1983;
189 pp.; £1.75, A$5.50)
BONES OF THE MOON
by Jonathan Carroll
(Legend 0 09 949870 7;
1987; 217 pp.; £3.50,
A$9.95)
OUTSIDE THE DOG MUSEUM
by Jonathan Carroll
(Macdonald
0 356 19589 9; 1991;
244 pp.; £12.95, A$29.95)

'Ssh. Watch now.' That's the last line of *Outside the Dog Museum*, Jonathan Carroll's most recent novel. How well it sums up the pleasures I get from Carroll's books. Stop watching for a moment or you'll miss something astonishing. Don't blink now. Read the next page.

But be prepared to be kicked in the cosmic infindibulum. In *Voice of our Shadow*, you find that everything you've been told before page 187 is a mask stretched over the true face of the world. I still haven't recovered from the ripping away of the mask. Nasty work, but delicious reading.

Bones of the Moon is far more conventional than Carroll's other novels. We just know that the nasty little boy who lives downstairs is going to cast an axe into somebody. It's just a

matter of waiting long enough, and travelling through the fascinating and dangerous alternative reality inhabited by Cullen James in her dreams. The book's ending is no more horrifying than that of most good horror stories, but in the end that's all the book adds up to. But unputdownable.

In his recent novels, Carroll has made something of a specialty of killing off our favourite characters just when we've got to know her, him or it. This time it's . . . no, I won't tell you. Very upsetting scene, that. Most of the other scenes in the book are extraordinary, as Harry Radcliffe wanders around being insufferably brilliant, afflicted by earthquakes and magic, and all sorts of weird happenings prevent him building the Dog Museum, which is *really* . . . but I can't tell you that, either.

'Ssh. Watch now.' You don't have any choice with a Carroll novel.

BACK DOOR MAN
by Ian McAuley Hails (Aphelion 1 875346 04 X; 407 pp.; A$14.95)

This book does not really belong in a science fiction and fantasy column. However, I've not yet organized myself enough to run a magazine (or even a column) devoted to crime and mystery fiction, and I know that sf fans will enjoy *Back Door Man* greatly. Besides, it is published by Aphelion Books, Australia's newest enterprising small publisher, which is recommendation enough.

By genre, *Back Door Man* comes straight from the thriller genre. It features lots of modern technology, its subject matter is spy networks, and it has a satisfactory conspiracy theory to account for the current sad state of Australian politics. The only thing it doesn't have is a big-name publisher who knows how to market and distribute a book like *Back Door Man* so that it sells in bucketloads.

No, I'm not slighting Ian McAuley Hails' publisher here. Since Hails indirectly implicates a very rich Australian publisher in his conspiracy theory, it's not surprising that the big publishers don't want to touch *Back Door Man*. It's a pity that large numbers of people will probably never see or hear of a copy, and therefore will be deprived of the fun I had reading it.

At the end of *Back Door Man*, Hails provides a diagram of Australia's interlocking intelligence networks. He adds another, which features in his story. His main character is Steven Plat, your ordinary workaday spy until he begins to investigate the deaths of people who shouldn't have been killed. Needless to say, Plat himself in invulnerable, although a fair number of dead bodies are left around the Sydney parks and paths by the end of the book. Plat would be a bit of a bore if he wasn't also funny. None of this square-jawed serious stuff. Plat *enjoys* action, and he enjoys going into a sort of lunatic state to upset his enemies.

It's obvious that Hails had great fun writing this book, but he has some serious points to make. Hails makes his conspiracy sound plausible, because it's a mere extension of everything that is currently happening in Australian politics. Also, he shows how computer networks can be used to provide a very narrow focus for most of the information that reaches the Australian public — although somebody like his main character, awake to the crime, could use the same computer networks to investigate the problem and destroy the conspiracy.

This book is probably available only from Slow Glass Books, Minotaur, and some of the crime fiction specialists. It's also available from the publisher, Aphelion Books, PO Box 619, North Adelaide, South Australia 5006.

FROM SEA TO SHINING STAR
by A. Bertram Chandler, edited by Keith Curtis and Susan Chandler; illustrated by Nick Stathopoulos (Dreamstone 0 9587968 0 7 (collectors' edition), 0 9587968 1 5 (numbered edition); 1990; 344 pp.; A$100 (collectors' edition), A$70 (numbered edition).

I trust that Wynne Whiteford's review of *From Sea to Shining Star* has already convinced you to buy it. It's a Major Publishing Project by any sf standards — a retrospective of an author who identified himself with Australia and made much of our landscape, language and viewpoint. As Wynne suggests, probably the best way to read the book is by reading the stories according to the publication dates listed in the Acknowledgements. Chandler's career begins with his best story, 'Giant Killer', moves through some compressed, memorable but conventional sf short stories, and abruptly changes in the early 1960s. His 1960s stories become diffuse: his themes become more interesting, but the style becomes chatty and rambling. All these contradictions can be found in 'The Kinsolving's Planet Irregulars' (1969), in which a brilliant idea is rather thrown away.

Apart from 'Giant Killer', my favourite story is 'The Idol' from 1959, just before this abrupt change of approach. Chandler's best story, 'Late', is not here.

Available from the specialist sources and from Dreamstone, PO Box 312, Fyshwick, ACT 2609.

STARSWARM
by Brian Aldiss (VGSF Classics No. 45, 0 575 04182 X; 1990, first publication 1964; 190 pp.; £3.50, A$11.50)

Starswarm (originally, with a different story line-up, *The Airs of Earth*) always suffered from being a 'fix-up'. Ignore the italicized bits that are supposed to link the stories, and you have one of Aldiss's better short story collections. 'Legends of Smith's Burst' is possibly Aldiss's funniest story, 'Old Hundredth' his most poignant, and 'A Kind of Artistry' one of his most memorable.

THE FORTRESS OF ETERNITY
by Andrew Whitmore (Avon 0 380 75744 3; 1990; 251 pp.; US$3.50, A$6.50)

This is the Australian fantasy novel that pretty much everybody ignored, including (I hear) American book buyers. I enjoyed it greatly, but I'm not surprised it's been unpopular. Whitmore has chosen to put the knife into every deeply beloved Boring Old Idea of the heroic fantasy field. Nobody's a nice person; lots of people are killed messily; several good guys get killed early in the narrative; the 'quest' has no direction or point; the landscape is inhospitable; the territory is dangerous. Lovely stuff. Whitmore's humour is dry and bitter: none of his characters escapes the acid. Says one: 'Tell them to look for me in hell . . . I understand that's where all the best people are going this year.' Whitmore has no talent for meeting the expectations of boring audiences, but he does have a talent for unlikely fantasy notions. You will enjoy meeting the guardians of the tunnel, each in turn guarding the

beast the guard is guarding against. The ending of the novel is a grand fizzy phantasmagoria of magical effects.

UNIVERSE 1
edited by Robert Silverberg and Karen Haber (Doubleday Foundation 0 385 24812 1; 1990; 449 pp.; US$19.95, A$28.50)

According to your taste, *Universe 1* (new series) is a boring collection that features a few brilliant stories, or a worthwhile collection of top stories inconveniently spoiled by some dull stuff. I favour the former. There are a lot of conventional or even bad stories. There are also some of the best stories of 1990: Ursula Le Guin's 'The Shobies' Story', which gives the reader an authentic feeling of having become dislocated in time and place; Kim Stanley Robinson's shaggy-language story 'The Translator'; Bruce Sterling's stylish, original 'The Shores of Bohemia', sketching in an alternative Europe and its unlikely inhabitants; and Gregor Hartmann's reality-scrambling 'O Time Your Pyramids'. Are there enough good stories to make it worth buying the book? I count six delectables and fifteen duds. Make your own buying choice.

STATION GEHENNA
by Andrew Weiner (Worldwide 0 373 30306 8; 1988; 250 pp.; US$3.95, A$6.95)

Okay, I read this because Andrew sent it to me. Otherwise I might never have seen a copy. I've never met Andrew Weiner, but I count him as a friend. I could spend the entire year reading books by friends or acquaintances. I'm prejudiced in favour of *Station Gehenna*, but I don't think it quite works. It contains much that would be familiar to readers of Philip Dick and Stanislaw Lem: terrestrials doing and experiencing very strange things while observing an alien planet. However, Andrew Weiner leaves his main characters mainly as ciphers, rather than characters, so the result is more like Barry Malzberg than Philip Dick. In fact, the prose is so spare and ironic and the story so oddly dispassionate that I wonder why the overseas reviewers didn't call Weiner 'the new Malzberg' and give him a Campbell Award. He will write very much better novels than *Station Gehenna*, but it's not a bad start to a novelist's career.

THE EYE OF THE HERON and THE WORD FOR WORLD IS FOREST
by Ursula Le Guin (VGSF 0 575 05060 8; 1991, first published 1977 (*Word*) and 1982 (*Heron*); 301 pp.; £3.99, A$11.99)

The blurb says: 'For the first time in one volume — two classic tales from one of fantasy's most intelligent and elegant writers.' I might have placed this book higher on the list if I could remember either story clearly. *The Word for World is Forest* is, as Ursula Le Guin admits in her Introduction, a preachy piece really about the Vietnam War, but it is also about the power of dreams. It's a long time since I read it, but I remember that its preachiness disappears into the more demanding world of dream, and that art is the result. *The Eye of the Heron* seemed when it first appeared merely a repetition of the ideas of several other books, especially those of the much more satisfying *Malafrena* and *Threshold*. It was a signal that Le Guin needed to take stock and find a new direction, which she did (*Always Coming Home*). But most people will still find it a satisfying tale.

THE DARK BETWEEN THE STARS
by Damien Broderick (Mandarin Australia 1 86330 083 X; 1991; 252 pp.; A$12.95. Available from Octopus Publishing, cnr. Salmon and Plummer Streets, Port Melbourne, Victoria 3207, Australia)

I wish I could like *The Dark Between the Stars* better than I do. It includes some of the best and the worst of Damien Broderick's writing, and I'm never sure that he can tell the difference. For example, 'The Ballad of Bowsprit Bear's Stand' is probably a fairly simple story, but I find it difficult to see clearly who or what is speaking to whom? In the end I had little idea what was going on. Australian fans often accuse Damien of 'using big words', but so do lots of other authors without causing offence. No, it's difficult to come to terms with those great floppy sentences, curling and uncurling all over the page, lashing out in umpteen directions, rarely allowing the reader to sit down to enjoy the story. Damien should take a knife to his own prose.

Often he does, of course. The introductions to the individual stories show Damien at his sparkling best, a raconteur of enormous style and depth. It's a pity that he doesn't substitute this precision and talent for dry observation for the colourful hysterics of stories like 'A Tooth for Every Child'.

I liked 'Coming Back', despite all the frothing sentences. I liked 'The Writeable Text', although no other reviewer seems to agree with me. And, like the other reviewers, I agree that the last story, 'The Magi', makes this book a must-buy. (I lie. What makes this book a *must*-buy is Damien's account (pp. 105–7) of meeting Harlan Ellison when he visited Melbourne.) In 'The Magi', great themes of cosmic and terrestrial destiny are brought to life in unforgettable images as a terrestrial team explores a treacherous far-distant planet. A story that, like *The Dreaming Dragons*, will keep Damien Broderick's reputation alive far from Australia's shores.

AGAINST THE FALL OF NIGHT
by Arthur C. Clarke /BEYOND THE FALL OF NIGHT
by Gregory Benford (Gollancz 0 575 04765 8; 1991, original publication of *Fall* in 1948; 239 pp.; £13.99, A$42)

'Clarke's [*The City and the Stars* based on 'Against the Fall of Night'] was quite simply the most important novel I have ever read, will ever read. It stapled my ambition to a kind of mad hunger, guaranteed that I yearned to be a science fiction writer.' Thus writes Damien Broderick in the introduction to *The Dark Between the Stars*. It was Damien's affirmation of faith that made me curious to read Arthur Clarke's legendary story. Alas! I read it too late — about thirty years too late. Clarke's 'classic' story now seems impersonal and diffuse, full of hints that it might burst into life, but never quite doing so. Clarke's early style was clear, controlled; some of his youthful sentences are perfect.

Gregory Benford, by comparison, is a literary barbarian. This volume includes *Beyond the Fall of Night*, his recent 'sequel' to *Against the Fall of Night*. None of the style of the origi-

nal remains, and little of its background. Some characters bear the same names as people in Clarke's original, but otherwise do not resemble them. And yet Benford's lumbering story has more life in any one of its pages than Clarke managed to squeeze out of the original story. Benford's story is very *biological*, to use an inadequate adjective. His characters set out from Earth in what seems like a giant space-going tree trunk, filled with myriad forms of life. The sense of struggle and real danger animates Benford's story while Clarke's remains a still-life painting. It's a bit hard to take Benford's story ending, in which entire galaxies seem to be laid waste in order to preserve the lives of two rather uninteresting main characters. It's all nonsense either way. I just wish I'd read Clarke's story at the age of seventeen; maybe I'd have become a Damien Broderick by now.

THE JONAH KIT by Ian Watson (VGSF 0 575 05002 0; 1991, first published 1975; 221 pp.; £3.99, A$11.95)

After the appearance of *The Embedding* (see above), Ian Watson produced only two other enjoyable novels, *The Martian Inca* and *The Jonah Kit*. However, in both of them the ideas seemed less urgent, less scalding than those cascading through *The Embedding*. The passion and attention to detail are still here, however; there are still people (including whales) in Watson's early novels. Now reprinted, *The Jonah Kit* is worth plunging into.

BLACK COCKTAIL by Jonathan Carroll, illustrated by Dave McKean (Legend Novella 0 7126 2164 4; 1990; 76 pp.; £4.50, A$12.95)

'Black Cocktail' is disappointing because in the end it becomes a thoroughly conventional, if jokey horror story. All the elements of a Carroll novel are here, including the nasty fate that awaits the main characters, but in the end you find yourself saying 'Pull the other leg'. A pity, because the story contains some of Carroll's finest paragraphs and most perceptive sentences. 'Who said the truth shall set you free?' Exactly.

THE SHADOW OF HEAVEN by Bob Shaw (Gollancz 0 575 04916 2; 1991, first published 1969; 174 pp.; £13.99, A$42)

A very early novel from Bob Shaw, but already he showed that combination of interesting future environments and achingly ordinary blokes that has been the mainstay of his best work since then. As the blurb says, 'Heaven is a giant anti-gravity floating disc—officially known as "International Land Extension US-23"' which means to Earth's inhabitants 'space, air and freedom'. Shaw writes well about the search for the secret of Heaven. This is satisfying adventure fiction written honestly and clearly.

One quibble. I received this book as a review copy. I doubt whether I could have bought it. Gollancz has changed its Australian distributor yet again. The new distributor, Jacaranda (I'm told by a bookseller), is translating British prices into Australian prices by the old formula of multiplying by three. Hence 14 quid becomes $42. For 174 pages? Who's kidding who? Surely such a pricing policy cuts Gollancz out of the Australian hardback market?

GLASS REPTILE BREAKOUT AND OTHER AUSTRALIAN SPECULATIVE STORIES edited by Van Ikin (Centre for Studies in Australian Literature, University of Western Australia; 1990; 161 pp.; A$14.95)

Much as it pains me to admit it, I can say that I agree with Scott Campbell. We agree that *Glass Reptile Breakout* is incomprehensibly disappointing. Gather around, ye school and college students: sample the most mediocre stories of the most interesting Australian sf writers. Broderick, Dowling, Egan, Frahm, Lake, Love, Maddern and Smith are all represented by ho-hum pieces.

Not all the stories are from their authors' second eleven. Sean McMullen's 'The Colours of the Masters' is a bracing surprise, for reasons outlined capably by Michael Tolley in his introduction to McMullen's new collection of short stories. Sue Isle's 'The Last Guardian' is the best story I've seen from this newish writer; and I'd forgotten that Van Ikin's 'Combatant' has an original premise. Russell Blackford's 'Glass Reptile Breakthrough' does not have quite the same impact as it had when I read it first. It is not so much a good short story as an effective first chapter of an unwritten novel.

When will somebody give me some money to put together a Best of Australian Short SF and Fantasy? Nobody will agree with all my choices, but at least my list must be more exciting than this selection.

MASTER OF LIES by Graham Masterton (Tor Horror 0 312 85102 2; 1992; 330 pp.; US$19.95)

This story begins with a chapter devoted to the ritual killing of an entire family. In the nastiest possible way. In the greatest possible detail. Despite this, I chundered my way to the second chapter. Abruptly the story becomes a police procedural. Not bad stuff, with a sympathetic policeman who realizes he's after a right na-na this time.

And *then* the book turns into a supernatural horror piece, with peculiar fireworks all over the place. I got confused, but I did keep reading. I had never heard of Graham Masterton before, but he has published lots of other books. He knows how to keep people turning the pages. The trouble is that the reader turns the last page and realizes the author has offered nothing but a series of silly tricks. There's a nice little San Francisco detective story lurking somewhere inside *Master of Lies*, but only in a few chapters does it escape.

STRANGER IN A STRANGE LAND, original uncut version, by Robert A. Heinlein (Ace 0 441 78838 6; 1991; 525 pp.; US$9.95, A$16.95)

When I read the 'cut' version of *Stranger in a Strange Land* some years ago, I thought that it needed to lose about 200 pages. Now I discover that some badly paid copy editor (all copy editors are badly paid) had reduced that edition to about 400 pages by carefully paring away endless bits of Heinleinian over-writing. And somebody has now put them back again! You are welcome to read it if you suffer from a masochistic temperament. #

MICHAEL J. TOLLEY is still working on his monumental study of the paintings of William Blake. He is now Associate Professor of English at the University of Adelaide and also the Director of its Centre for British Studies. In his non-existent spare time he is working on a bibliography of Peter Yates (Carter Brown), editing *The Body Dabbler*, an admirable small magazine about mystery fiction, teaching a science fiction course, and contributing to magazines like this one.

VINTAGE TOLLEY:
Sf and fantasy reviews

by Michael Tolley

THE ASTOUNDING MR CLARKE

ASTOUNDING DAYS:
A SCIENCE FICTIONAL AUTOBIOGRAPHY
by Arthur C. Clarke

Gollancz 575 04774 7; pb; 1990, original publication 1989; 224 pp.; £4.99

I found this book highly interesting, much more so than Frederik Pohl's autobiography *The Way the Future Was* (1978), which I thought I should read in advance of this one to give me some perspective on Clarke's. Although Pohl's book might easily have shared Clarke's subtitle, and although they begin in almost exactly the same way — Pohl encountering his first science fiction magazine, *Science Wonder Stories Quarterly*, in 1930 at the age of ten, Clarke in the same year, aged thirteen, acquiring his first science fiction magazine, *Astounding Stories of Super-Science* (although he admits that he had earlier seen the November 1928 issue of *Amazing Stories*) — thereafter the two most famous contributors to science fiction as we know it proceed along different tracks.

Pohl's is a conventional autobiography in which he presents himself as a clever, successful but rather shallow individual (thereby perhaps deceiving himself and his readers).

Clarke's life is presented as a series of footnotes to a more important history that was proceeding at the same time, that of *Astounding* magazine. The major section divisions are given the names of *Astounding* editors, Bates, Tremaine, Campbell. Analyses of particular issues and stories, critiques of writers associated with the magazine, pen portraits of the editors, come to the fore, while Clarke's own life story proceeds quietly, if not altogether modestly, as it can be fitted in, often through actual footnotes rather than separate chapters.

There is some method of Clarke's quirkiness; it appears that this is only one of his autobiographies: another is called *Ascent to Orbit: A Scientific Autobiography*. *Astounding* did not actually publish many Clarke stories: five from 1946 to 1961 and two in the 1980s (both reprinted here); discussion of the magazine serves rather as a pad from which he can launch into various subjects, particularly the place of the British Interplanetary Society in the history of the Space Age. In this respect, *Astounding Days* makes much better reading than that lamentable book by Dale Carter I reviewed for *The Age Monthly Review*, *The Final Frontier*, which presented the space race in the light of Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*. Arthur C. Clarke, with his background, would have been an ideal reviewer for that book: I wonder whether he ever read Pynchon.

The scientists with whom Clarke has hobnobbed do not always appear in the most flattering light; frankly, they sometimes seem not only vain but silly with it (it is fair to add that Clarke does not always spare himself from the same imputation).

The most serious lack in the book is an index, which would have been much better value than the Appendix quoting Clarke's letters to *Astounding*, in which some of the silliness appears, regarding theories about the origin of craters on the Moon.

The book is full of fascinating information, even if some of it is misinformation and will provoke energetic disagreement at times. It is, nevertheless, in my view nowhere near so revealing and important a document about a science fiction writer as either of 1990's biographies of Philip K. Dick.

MAGIC IN LARGE CITIES

GREENMANTLE
by Charles de Lint

Ace 0 441 30295 5; 1988; viii + 328 pp.; US$3.50

JACK THE GIANT-KILLER
[THE JACK OF KINROWAN: A NOVEL OF URBAN FAERIE]
by Charles de Lint

Ace 0 441 37969 9; 1987; viii + 202 pp.; US$16.95)

The following quotation from Part 3, Chapter 3 of de Lint's *Greenmantle* will give some idea of the brew that has been mixed here. Frankie, a normal person, laments to her friend Tony, who is a retired Family man:

> '. . . I feel like nothing's real right now . . . or maybe it's too real. I don't know. Here we are

> with all these guns, waiting for either Earl [her ex-husband, a drug courier] or some extras from *The Godfather* to show up. Meanwhile, my daughter is running around the woods with a stag and some girl who has horns growing from her head. Does any of it make sense to you, Tony?'

The front cover of my copy shows a stag-headed man wearing a cape of laurel leaves in a vaguely druidic landscape, where a tiny gnome holds a pan pipe in the branch of a tree above him; the back cover shows an attractive young woman in modern dress inside a dark forest where bones burn on a rock and little dragons lurk. The epigraphs for the Prologue relate to Pan, one from Aleister Crowley, the other from Tanith Lee.

Thus it was a shock to find myself plunged immediately into the idiom of a modern American thriller with the first words of the novel proper:

> By the time Eddie 'the Squeeze' Panelli was five hours dead, Valenti was on a Boeing 747 halfway across the Atlantic.

The novelty of the book seems to be in placing ordinary people between the kinds of adult comic-book urban people who live in films and thrillers, hit men and drug runners, and mysterious pastoral magical creatures and people who belong to the woods. Not only do we get an intriguing formal blend of genres by this means but the reality of both worlds, that of the thriller and that of fantasy, is challenged.

Usually it is only the fantasy world that is accounted unbelievable. If fantasy is approached from the thriller world, as in David Morrell's *The Covenant of the Flame*, it is not usually given independent status as existing outside the minds of believers. For the 'normal' heroine, Frankie, when she is preparing for a deadly attack from villains, 'what was happening now belonged on some cops 'n' robbers show, not real life.' Thus de Lint's narrative strategy, whether he calculated this or not, is to suggest that if the reader can believe in the world of Tony Valenti, Earl (a real scumbag) and Louie, a hit man who is trying to kill Tony, there should be no problem with belief in the fantasy world. The one is as unlikely as the other.

Charles de Lint claims that his main sources of inspiration for the book were *The Wind in the willows* and Lord Dunsany's fantasy *The Blessing of Pan*. The famous mystical passage in Grahame's book was never my own favourite part, and I suspected that it was the sort of thing adults liked and told kids they should like. I have never come across the Dunsany title.

De Lint makes his story more difficult for me by setting it in a Canadian forest, which seems to me about as unlikely an idea as locating fairies in the Appalachians, as John Crowley did in the overblown and self-indulgent *Little, Big*. Although de Lint never mentions John Crowley, his novel seems to be in the same tradition, only more obviously exciting as a narrative. Instead of John Crowley, he invokes such writers as Thomas Burnett Swann, the theosophists, Talbot Mundy and Colin Wilson. His work will conceivably be valued by those on the side of the wiccas. I happen to be on the Christians' side, so I am not pleased with the reductive crisis in which one of the heroines is tortured by a monk with a burning cross in an effort to force her to renounce her pagan friends as Satanic.

Nevertheless, de Lint's 'Old Hornie' has considerable dignity and charm, though his world is somewhat bleak and thinly populated. The harsh, bitter quality of his criminal classes (the ones against whom his spectral monks might be expected to be directly opposed, instead of attributing the human villains' brutality to the provocative music of Pan) sufficiently prevents de Lint from lapsing into simple sentimentality.

Mysteries and secrets remain at the end of his novel, which is well worth reading if one is interested in trans-generic writing, or even if one just wants a good read. De Lint's discussion of myth in relation to Christianity should not be taken too seriously, but then most of it is not in his own voice, but in those of the 'homespun' village philosophers, old Lewis and Lucy.

The Jack of Kinrowan, being part of a series of fairy tales in Ace fantasy books, is somewhat confusing for the bibliographer, because the title page announces only its subject — the particular fairy story that is being retold for modern adults — although de Lint's title shares equal space in the page headings and is detailed in the title-page verso.

Furthermore, the general Introduction is unattributed, though it is presumably by Terri Windling, who suggested the idea of the book to de Lint, according to his own Foreword. The cover portrait of an imposing figure with a sword bears no resemblance to anybody in the book, and is the more irritating because it could be read as that of the giant as a handsome man (or conceivable a woman), though the book itself lacks the subtlety of appearances greatly belying realities.

All this is to say nothing against the novel itself, which is a good scary modern urban fantasy in which ensorcelled hunters ride motor bikes through an Ottawa that is the tragic scene of a ghastly war of good and evil creatures just on the other side of normal mortal vision. When a murdered hob's red cap gives young Jacky Rowan the power to see the invisible Faery creatures who have been brought over to the New World with the early settlers, she (of course, she) is rushed into a frightfully dangerous mission to rescue a princess from a giant's cavern. Only a mortal well endowed with luck could achieve this mission; it is fortunate that lucky Jacky has some intelligent friends.

The issue of belief in faery and its impingement on everyday urban life is sensibly handled, and the crucial problem of corruptive power (Tolkien's ring-lordship problem) is well resolved. Apart from a sequence in which I had to endure a HIBK stupidity, I enjoyed this book. Charles de Lint is a fantasy writer I shall continue to read.

NEITHER VOLTAIRE NOR CANDIDE

TO THE LAND OF THE LIVING
by Robert Silverberg

VGSF 0 575 04496 9; 1990, originally published 1989; 308 pp.; £3.99

This 1989 novel is set principally in the Land of the Dead, which is less neatly constructed than the Riverworld of Philip José Farmer; magic and technology, old and new beliefs contend in it.

As did Farmer (who is entitled to some dedicatory homage but gets none), Silverberg jumbles together famous people from the past, which makes the novel at least in part a biographical enterprise. The early appearances of H. P. Lovecraft and Robert E. Howard will not augur

well for some readers, and the Afterworld's ecosphere is more than a little Chthuluized (but the landscape is, to begin with, somewhat like that of Texas). One at once perceives that this Afterworld will be no pleasant comfortable place most of the decent kindly people who read Silverberg's books, and that it will be more than a little conditioned by Silverberg's favourite fantasists and the fantasies of his favourite dead people.

All the same, the novel might still have been the 'sustained philosophical fantasy' that someone hired by the *Belfast Telegraph* thought it to be; might still have been as 'witty and perceptive' as some dullard in *Books* described it. It might have been all these things had it not been for one crippling disadvantage: Silverberg's choice of hero.

I have not read Silverberg's *Gilgamesh the King*, and if *To the Land of the Living* is secretly designed to sell that earlier epic work, the author will be disappointed to learn that he has failed in his aim. Gilgamesh is not capable of sustained philosophy: all he thinks he wants out of life is hunting with his great friend Enkidu (whereas Enkidu seems to want to spend most of his life hunting and fornicating without his great friend Gilgamesh, hence the quest motif: the search for Enkidu, no sooner found than lost again).

Gilgamesh is himself devoid of witty perception: he is still lost in the old simplicities, completely baffled by his encounter with that great practical philosopher Pablo Picasso, for example. My reader might accordingly think that, since Silverberg's with is clearly not directed much against the heroic Gilgamesh, the author must be using this innocent from the past in order to expose satirically the corruption of those in Gilgamesh's future. This is true to a degree, but Gilgamesh is no Candide, and Silverberg is certainly no Voltaire.

Nevertheless, if one wishes to amuse oneself with idle thoughts about certain leading figures from the past (such as Raleigh, Simon Magus, Herod Agrippa and Vy-Otin the Hairy Man), Silverberg's novel might be a suitable stimulant. If, on the other hand, one wishes to engage in a serious reflection on the nature of the Afterworld, Silverberg is not the best guide: Plato, Socrates, Aristotle (to look no higher) are notably absent from his pages.

I almost forgot to mention that we do indeed, at length, reach the land of the living, in a sequence that is bound to remind one of an episode in *The Man in the High Castle* — a reminiscence that is likely to send one speedily back to the authentic wit and audacious speculative fantasies of Philip K. Dick, away from the tedious redundancies of Silverberg in his inflated epic mood.

— **Michael J. Tolley, December 1991**

APOLOGIES FOR THE OUT OF DATE

ROBOT DREAMS
by Isaac Asimov

Berkley 0 425 09345 X; 1986; 349 pp.; US$7.95

There are twenty-one stories here, mostly from the 1950s. The collection is an attractively packaged trade paperback with illustrations by Ralph McQuarrie. Head decorations suggest that each story is a robot's dream, but the (new) title story is one of only two Susan Calvin stories in the anthology, so some readers may feel cheated.

Susan decides that it is too dangerous to allow robots to dream: the dream may be about power. The threat of power is a frequent motif in this representative sample of Asimov's shorter work. In 'The Last Question' the human quest is to gain the power to create, to reverse entropy; in 'The Last Answer' (which takes place in an afterlife situation) it is to gain the power to bring conscious existence to an end. In 'Strikebreaker', a man becomes a social leper by resolving an ethnic problem on a planet where the pariahs are the waste disposers, who have rightly begun to resent their position. More lightly, in 'The Feeling of Power', a humble technician of the sixth millennium AD reinvents the wheel, as it were, by discovering that he can do simple sums without using a calculator. People regain a sense of wonder by discovering that they can do it too. In 'Franchise', becoming the one representative voter on the second Tuesday in November is almost as much fun as winning the Melbourne Cup would be on the first Tuesday.

In his Introduction, Asimov is mainly occupied with the predictive power of his stories, and is suitably apologetic about his failures. He is chastened by his inability, in most of the Multivac (computer) stories, to forecast miniaturization, and there is no doubt that some of these stories look a little quaint nowadays.

Asimov's defensive strategy is to play down the science and boost the fictional value: he hopes hat we enjoy the stories, as such. Unfortunately, it is relatively uncommon for him to give us a good story, however willing we might be to grant him the poetic licence he claims, as he does for 'The Billiard Ball' (itself a well-crafted murder story). 'The Martian Way' seems dull now that its obtrusive high-tech stuff about Saturn's rings (exploited by space travellers without the aid of computers) is so obviously out of date.

Stories that will not go out of date so easily are those paranoid ones about human beings manipulated by aliens for particular ends, such as 'Breeds There a Man . . .', 'Hostess', 'Jokester' (weak because its premise is rubbish) and 'Does a Bee Care?'

On the whole, the stories I like are the less cerebral ones, such as 'The Ugly Little Boy' (which, it is good to note, has become outmoded ethically, in the best societies), 'Light Verse', 'Sally' and 'Lest We Remember', or even the neatly constructed 'True Love'.

YET MORE LISTOMANIA

compiled by Justin Ackroyd

It's nice to keep tabs on people as loony about lists as I am. In this case, **JUSTIN ACKROYD of Slow Glass Books, GPO Box 2708X, Melbourne, Victoria 3001** runs his 'Best Books Read' lists once a year in his monthly catalogue. (Justin does not order in books until you request them from the catalogue. He manages to get most books you ask for.)

The following lists appeared in *Slow Glass Books Catalogue* No. 44, March 1992. Justin does not make it plain the significance of the order in these lists. For instance, I had supplied a rank order, but Justin left out the numbers. Some other lists are probably in random order or in alphabetical order by author.

Justin left out one of my lists (since it was of short stories, not books), so I've restored it. Also I've added a few top items from my 'non-sf favourite books' of 1991. My complete Favourite Novels and Favourite Books lists will appear as usual in the next issue of *The Metaphysical Review*.

All comments from now on are those supplied by Justin Ackroyd or his contributors.

JUSTIN ACKROYD:

Science fiction/fantasy/horror:
Alone Against Tomorrow by Harlan Ellison
Approaching Oblivion by Harlan Ellison
The Cepher by Kathe Koja
City of Truth by James Morrow
Sugar Rain by Paul Park

Crime/mystery:
A Country of Old Men by Joseph Hansen
Silence of the Lambs by Thomas Harris
Devil in a Blue Dress by Walter Mosley
A Woman's Eye edited by Sara Paretsky
Pastime by Robert B. Parker
The Getaway by Jim Thompson
The Grifters by Jim Thompson

Mainstream:
The Call of the Wild, White Fang, and Other Stories by Jack London
Of Mice and Men by John Steinbeck

Worst book of 1991:
The Gap into Conflict: The Real Story by Stephen R. Donaldson. 140 pages of poorly written, misogynistic crap.

BRUCE GILLESPIE

Science fiction and fantasy:
Only Begotten Daughter by James Morrow
In the Field of Fire edited by Jeanne Van Buren Dann and Jack Dann
Blood Is Not Enough edited by Ellen Datlow
Sleeping in Flame by Jonathan Carroll
Time and Chance by Alan Brennert
Brain Child by George Turner
Voice of our Shadow by Jonathan Carroll
Bones of the Moon by Jonathan Carroll

Short stories: science fiction and fantasy:
'Varicose Worms' by Scott Baker (*Blood Is Not Enough*)
'The Moon' by David Brooks (*Millennium*)
'Goats' by Dave Smeds (*In the Field of Fire*)
'The Shores of Bohemia' by Bruce Sterling (*Universe 1*)
'Credibility' by John Kessel (*In the Field of Fire*)
'Dream Baby' by Bruce McAllister (*In the Field of Fire*)
'The Shobies' Story' by Ursula K. Le Guin (*Universe 1*)
'The Extra' by Greg Egan (*Eidolon 2*)
'Turtle Soup' by Rosaleen Love (*Eidolon 3*)
'Shades' by Lucius Shepard (*In the Field of Fire*)
'Lazarus' by Leonid Andreyev (*Blood Is Not Enough*)

Non-fiction and non-sf/fantasy:
Patrick White: A Life by David Marr
The Burnt Ones by Patrick White
The Transit of Venus by Shirley Hazzard
Selected Poems 1960–1985 by Andrew Taylor
Stallion Gate by Martin Cruz Smith
Kickback by Garry Disher
Ragtime by E. L. Doctorow
The Man With a Load of Mischief by Martha Grimes

TERRY DOWLING, author of *Rynosseros* and *Wormwood*; sf reviewer for *The Australian*:

Queen of Angels by Greg Bear
Magic Casement by Dave Duncan
The Witching Hour by Anne Rice
Moonheart by Charles de Lint
The Dark Between the Stars by Damien Broderick
The Fall of Hyperion by Dan Simmons
War Fever by J. G. Ballard
The Days of PerkyPat, Volume 4 of the collected stories of Philip K. Dick
Needful Things by Stephen King
Eidolon edited by Jeremy Byrne, Jonathan Strahan and Richard Scriven. An Australian quarterly fiction and critical magazine, published in Perth, and devoted to science fiction.

JONATHAN STRAHAN one of the editors of *Eidolon*:

Fiction:
King of Morning, Queen of Day by Ian McDonald
The Hereafter Gang by Neal Barrett Jr
Queen of Angels by Greg Bear
The Paper Grail by James P. Blaylock
Dandelion Wine by Ray Bradbury
The October Country by Ray Bradbury
Synners by Pat Cadigan
The Adventures of Dr Eszterhazy by Avram Davidson
Buddy Holly Is Alive and Well on Ganymede by Bradley Denton
A Fire in the Sun by George Alec Effinger
Thomas the Rhymer by Ellen Kushner
Savage Season by Joe R. Lansdale
Tehanu: the Last Book of Earthsea by Ursula K. Le Guin
The Ends of the Earth by Lucius Shepard
Her Smoke Rose Up Forever by James Tiptree Jr
Night of the Cooters by Howard Waldrop
Death Qualified by Kate Wilhelm

Non-fiction:
The Life and Art of Winsor McCay by John Canemaker
Of Mice and Magic by Leonard Maltin.

MICHAEL CLARK, Adelaide scotch critic:

Horror/fantasy:
Mongster by Randall Boyll. This was a real find: a genuinely horrible story which is also very funny in places. It is guaranteed to offend many of its readers.
The Cipher by Kathe Koja
The Coachman Rat by David Henry Wilson

Science fiction:
Synners by Pat Cadigan
Grass by Sheri S. Tepper
Hyperion by Dan Simmons

Crime/thriller:
Mystery by Peter Straub
Lie to Me by David Martin
Mercy by David Lindsay

Mainstream:
The Remains of the Day by Kazuo Ishiguro
The Chymical Wedding by Lindsey Clarke
The Collected Works of Billy the Kid by Michael Ondaatje

Golden Brickbat:
The Stress of Her Regard by Tim Powers: for the drivel he places in the mouths of Byron, Shelley and Keats. How he wrote a book as good as *The Anubis Gates* is beyond me — he hasn't got near it since.

MARK MORRISON, games writer with good taste in books:

Rats and Gargoyles by Mary Gentle
Revenge of the Rose by Michael Moorcock
State of the Art by Iain M. Banks
Ghostlight by Michael Cadnum
Sleepwalker by Michael Cadnum
Calling Home by Michael Cadnum.

ANDREW SULLIVAN, budding author #1:

Horror:
Carrion Comfort by Dan Simmons
Something Wicked This Way Comes by Ray Bradbury
Act of Love by Joe R. Lansdale
Moon Dance by S. P. Somtow
In the Land of the Dead by K. W. Jeter

Fantasy:
Bridge of Birds by Barry Hughart
Fade by Robert Cormier
Time and Chance by Alan Brennert
On Stranger Tides by Tim Powers
Madouc by Jack Vance

Science fiction:
Hyperion by Dan Simmons
The Fall of Hyperion by Dan Simmons
Dream Baby by Bruce McAllister
The Forever War by Joe Haldeman
The Boat of a Million Years by Poul Anderson
Santiago by Mike Resnick
Replay by Ken Grimwood
The Time Machine by H. G. Wells
The Martian Chronicles by Ray Bradbury
In the Ocean of Night by Gregory Benford
Soldiers of Paradise by Paul Park.

STEVEN MILLER, budding author #2:

The Long Goodbye by Raymond Chandler
Lolita by Vladimir Nabokov
Pop. 1280 by Jim Thompson
Factotum by Charles Bukowski
Small World by David Lodge
Despair by Vladimir Nabokov
The Waste Lands by Stephen King
Pastime (and *Early Autumn*) by Robert B. Parker
The Blithedale Romance by Nathaniel Hawthorne
Perfume by Patrick Suskind.