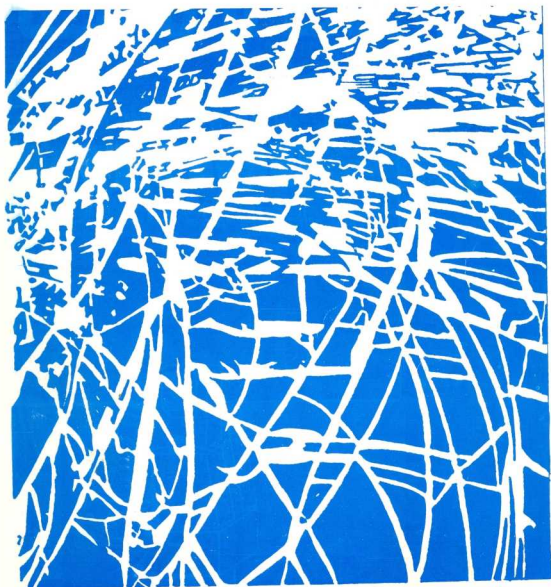


VECTOR

100

The Critical Journal of the BSFA

75p



bsfa

December 1980

VECTOR

The Critical Journal of the BSFA

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Printed by the BSFA.

Thanks are due to John and Eve Harvey, who actually did the printing work.

The BSFA printing service is available to BSFA members. Please contact John and Eve for details.

John & Eve Harvey, 55 Blanchland Road, Morden, Surrey, SM4 5NE.

ADVERTISING RATES 1980

Back cover	£40
Interior - full page	£30
half page	£20
qtr. page	£10

All copy A4 or division for reduction to A5. Copy to be black on white, camera ready. Please leave a half inch margin all round. Quotes will be given for special requirements.

All advertising correspondence to:

Trevor Briggs
Business Manager
6 The Plains
Crescent Road
Chingford
London
E4 6AU

Tel. 01-529 3361, evenings only.

VECTOR is published four times a year -- in April, June, October and December -- by
The British Science Fiction Association Limited.

ISSN 0505-0448

Membership of THE BRITISH SCIENCE FICTION ASSOCIATION costs £6.00 per year. For this almost insignificant sum you receive 6 mailings per year, containing MATRIX, PAPERBACK INFERNO and either FOCUS or VECTOR. MATRIX contains news and views of the science fiction world, PAPERBACK INFERNO reviews the newly published paperback books, FOCUS is about writing SF, and the contents of VECTOR are adequately demonstrated in the rest of this issue. Membership also gives you access to the various BSFA services, the new monthly meetings in London, and the wide world of science fiction.

All membership enquiries should be sent to the Membership Secretary:

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Other enquiries and general correspondence about the BSFA should be sent to the Chairman (we have to find something for him to do):

Alan Dorey, 20 Hermitage Woods Crescent, St John's, Woking, Surrey, GU21 1UE.

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THIS ISSUE

... is issue 100, in case you hadn't noticed, and by way of celebration I've persuaded a few previous editors to write a few words about their time as editor. "One Hundred Vectors!" is the result. In addition, Alan Dorey has read all the issues to date and on the basis of that written "A Telegram for Vector" -- a quick review of them all. In "Who's Driving the Time Machine?" (not "Bus", as I incorrectly announced last issue) Garry Kilworth assesses the influences on published SF. Dave Langford, unwilling to let neglected writers remain neglected, is "Digging Up The Future"; in other words, looking in detail at the fantasy novels of G.K. Chesterton. (You didn't know he'd written any? That's partly what we're here for...) In "Let Us Now Re-appraise Famous Men" Andrew M. Stephenson considers Arthur C. Clarke and the *Ommi* lecture. "Half-Life" returns for this issue, to add its weight to the celebrations, I think. "Standpoint" considers SF criticism from two angles, and SF sequels and series. The "Book Reviews" column contains reviews of books (which is probably very reassuring) and the "Letters" have letters in them.

And now -- the news you've all been waiting for. This issue's page-filling squibs are taken from *The Troglodytes* by Nal Rafcam, a Digit Book!

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

ONE HUNDRED VECTORS!

(1958-80)

THE EDITORS

1	Ted Tubb
2 -4	Terry Jeeves
5	Roberta Wild
6 -7	Roberta Gray & Mike Moorcock
8 -15	Jim Groves
16-17	Ella Parker
18	Jim Groves
19-25	Archie Mercer
26-39	Rog Peyton
40	Steve Oakey
41-42	Ken Slater & Doreen Parker
43	Doreen Parker
44	Darroll Pardoe
45-46	Phil Muldowney
47	Tony Sudbery
48-49	Tony Sudbery & Vic Hallett
50-55	Michael Kenward
56-58	Bob Parkinson
59-68	Malcolm Edwards
69-83	Chris Fowler
84-94	David Wingrove
95-97	Mike Dickinson
98	Alan Dorey, Joseph Nicholas & Kevin Smith
99-?	Kevin Smith

It seemed like a good idea at the time — to ask previous editors of Vector to write about their editorship, that is. Even then I realised that there were a few snags to be ironed out, such as "Who were they?" and "Where are they now?" But hadn't Alan Dorey just been given almost a complete run of Vectors? Didn't Keith Freeman's computer contain the addresses of everyone in the Universe? Such snags were surely as nothing! When, eventually, Alan gave me a complete list of past editors I discovered that issues 1-5 either hadn't been edited or hadn't existed at all. This was a blow; magazines do not generally start at No.6, and if Vector had done so we were only up to No.95 anyway. Fortunately Keith had a complete list of past editors that was more complete than Alan's, and the gaps for issues 1-5 could be filled in. Unfortunately this only left me about ten minutes to find out their addresses, write to them, and obtain short articles from them. The articles that follow, therefore, are from those editors who replied out of those I asked. No value judgements about the issues they or the others edited are intended or implied; nor are any slights on those I didn't write to. I'm sorry; I meant to write to everyone, but my excuse is one you, as past editors, will recognise and appreciate — I didn't have time!

100 *Vectors*! Way back in 1964 it looked as if *Vector* 25 could be the last. Archie Mercer was not restanding as Publications Officer -- in fact, only the position of Treasurer had a nomination and it appeared as if the BSFA would have to do a bit of arm-twisting at the 1964 AGM. That would-be Treasurer was Charles Winstone, then a prominent member of the Birmingham SF Group, who somehow managed to fire enough enthusiasm at one of the Brum Group weekly meetings that several of us decided to stand to fill the gaps on the BSFA committee. I drew the short straw and ended up taking over the editorship of *Vector*. No bids came forward for organising the 1965 Eastercon, either, so the Brum Group members who had been elected to the BSFA committee stood up and volunteered to run that as well. My very first convention and I came away having taken control of *Vector*, and with a place on the committee for *Brumcon* 2! Looking back it seems sheer madness that fandom at that time allowed us to take on so much responsibility -- we'd only joined the BSFA six months earlier. But that was typical in those early days: the BSFA had less than 200 members and the same small group had been running things since the BSFA's birth in 1958. They'd had enough and their attitude must have been 'a volunteer is a volunteer'.

Looking back through the 14 issues of *Vector* I produced, I recall that material for publication was *very* short. Articles *were* sent in to *Vector*, but in such small quantities that very little choice was available... I doubt that I rejected more than half a dozen articles in the two-year editorship. This resulted in a wide variety of aspects of SF -- from Philip Harbottle's articles on SF of the pulp era to articles on Jorge Luis Borges, from 'Science Fiction and Philosophy' to 'The Economics of SF', and from 'The World Saver Returns: Edmond Hamilton in Focus' to 'The Real Ideas of Philip K. Dick'. If articles were in short supply, good artwork was even harder to come by. To help break up the great slabs of wordage I experimented with coloured ink on headings, though eventually this proved to be too time-consuming. I remember the delight I felt when Brian McCabe delivered his artwork for the article on Jack Vance, and then cursing him when it took me about 8 hours to get 250 copies of one of his illustrations. I had to re-ink the duplicator after every copy! Yes, in those days the editor also had to *produce* the copies as well -- duplicating, collating, stapling, and also addressing all the envelopes for mailing. A very time-consuming job: after I'd stuck the stamps on the envelopes and delivered them to the post office it was time to start on the *next* issue. It was because of the shortage of time that the decision was taken to have *Vector* professionally printed. I'd already experimented with printed covers (*anything* to reduce my work-load) and so by October 1965 *Vector* was ready to go professional.

Issue 35 was printed by a small firm just round the corner from my office; they were relatively cheap, most of their work being parish magazines for various churches over the Midlands -- I think they charged about £30 for 500 copies. The printer also typed the masters -- he employed old spinsters who were only too pleased to work for peanuts to help keep down the cost of church magazines. But this backfired. In *Vector* 38 I ran an article entitled 'Sex is a Strange Mistress' -- a study of the sex in SF, in particular in the works of Heinlein. Harmless stuff to us, of course, but the old ladies at the printers started objecting to typing *Vector*. Issue 39 was ready for typing about two weeks later and they agreed to produce that issue, but made it clear that they didn't want to type any more material for the BSFA. That, added to the fact that I'd done two years 'time' anyway, made me think about giving up BSFA committee work. The last straw came when the first letter of comment arrived after a particularly meaty issue. It simply complained that the staples weren't in a straight line! That was enough -- someone else could take over *Vector*.

But I don't regret those two years. It threw me into the deep end of fandom and I've never wanted to get out.

Those of you who were around in 1966 and 1967 will recall that the BSFA was then (not unusually) in a state of collapse, and Doreen Parker (now Doreen Rogers) and I and a few other stout-hearted personages gave it a sort of cross between the kiss of life and a sharp spur in the ribs, and transformed it into the BSFA Ltd -- which at least

gave it some continuity and less chance of vanishing every time the membership looked the other way. Part of my duty was to edit *Vector* (under protest); I don't recall how many issues, probably only two or three, badly produced by unbalanced fen on an unbalanced Roneo.

I do recall that I had to start from scratch with no backlog of anything like manuscripts, and expended some of the goodwill owing me by getting Ken Bulmer, Chris Priest, Ted Tubb and Dan Morgan to contribute. Actually I think it was Doreen who extracted a contribution from Dan. I honestly thought that I was inviting them to be guests at a wake, but it seems not. Still she runs! Or is it just that fankind always produces the necessary number of masochistic folk who enjoy kicking against the pricks?

Whatever, I am pleased that the BSFA continues, that *Vector* continues, and that the organisation has now achieved an age greater than that of some of its members. So, disjointed, pointless, and not of any great value -- a taste of the sort of stew I mixed up for the membership of the BSFA before it got limited...

DOREEN PARKER (41-43)

When the BSFA nearly died

What memories these invoke! It was before the (limited) company was formed, and the Committee, with the exception of Ken and myself, seemed to have disappeared with all the asset (which, I hasten to add, were later found). There had been no *Vectors* for months, so Ken and I decided to produce one. Ken supplied the paper and the stencils, which I typed, with my usual bad spelling and grammar, mixed metaphors, split infinitives, etc. I contacted Phil who was a past Chairman (and also, as he frequently reminds me, at the time a wealthy bachelor) to borrow the postage money; upon reflection I don't think the BSFA ever repaid him. I then contacted all the authors, artists and BNFs I knew and begged, cajoled, bullied and promised God knows what in return for material. Joyce and I ran off the stencils on a faulty old hand machine; every six pages (it is engraved on my heart like Mary Tudor) it rejected and we had to reset. Trish was about 8 at the time and she and I collated, put up and posted it. To this day she dislikes *Vector*! For some reason I disremember, I edited the whole of 43, and we will gloss over this on the basis that I am an old and tired fan who should now be treated with care and consideration.

We had a terrific postbag response, which encouraged us to go on to the next AGM. I particularly remember Ethel (Lindsay) writing in sorrow about the pastiche by Dan Morgan of J.G. Ballard, asking him to return to his normal writing style and forget about the 'new wave'! It was hard work, it was fun (when we weren't worrying) but no way would I attempt it again.

I lost my copies through subsequent events, so if there are any around how about lending them to me for photocopying for posterity -- mine, of course!

DARROLL PARDOE (44)

I only spent three months as *Vector* editor, and in that time I only managed to get out a single issue, so I can't claim that my incumbency was a very significant one. At the Easter convention in 1967, at the Hawthorns Hotel in Bristol, the BSFA had great difficulty in finding a volunteer to take on the editorship of *Vector*; in fact they found nobody at all until I stood up and offered my services (after a good deal of pressure applied by certain people who shall be nameless). I put out an issue of *Vector* as soon as I could after the convention: it wasn't a very good one, partly because I hadn't received the main *Vector* files when I did it. For some reason a prominent committee member took exception to my efforts, and sent me a postcard couched in fairly offensive terms, to the effect of 'if you can't do better why not resign?' -- so I did. My period as *Vector* editor, therefore, was not long enough that I was able to put any individual stamp upon it and I think it deserves to remain in the oblivion to which, until this short article was solicited from me, it had rightly been consigned.

BOB PARKINSON (56-58)

Your letter and the 99th issue of *Vector*...came like a voice out of a past long since passed by, and I found myself slightly surprised to discover the resiliency of both the BSFA and *Vector* in having survived this long. I think I was not one of the better editors the journal had, and the strain of soliciting material, putting it together, typing it up, and getting it printed and out to members rapidly proved too much. It is nice to see that the battles that I lost have later been won, with a well presented, well filled magazine (although I have no doubt you still have to sweat blood into every issue).

MALCOLM EDWARDS (59-68)

It was easy to become editor of *Vector* back in 1972. All you needed to do was attend the monthly meetings at the Globe (as it then was) and become incautiously involved in conversation with the moguls of the BSFA. It will be hard for current members to comprehend this, but back in those dark days the BSFA was pretty much of a shambles its annual meetings polite affairs of endless mutual recrimination over the total failure of anybody to do anything (with the exception of Keith Freeman, an unobtrusive tower of strength then as now, and Jill Adams, the treasurer, whose recent death has sadly gone unremarked in BSFA publications). In 1970 and 71 a total of four issues of *Vector* had appeared, each a weedy little item of 20-odd unremarkable pages. Bob Parkinson, editor for three of those issues, had resigned. Nobody had come forward to replace him, although in desperation Vic Hallett had agreed to mastermind an interim issue. At this point I blithely came in. In 1970/71 I'd done two issues of a fairly SF-oriented fanzine, *Quicksilver*, and had material for No.3, but no money with which to publish it. If I took over *Vector*, my inebriated brain told me, I could carry on publishing my fanzine and the BSFA could foot the bill.

And so I went home and, typewriter on knee (I lacked sophisticated office equipment), set to work typing stencils — serious stuff by and about Stan Lem (a Polish SF writer prominent at the time) and various other bits and pieces. I had no artwork on hand, but instead devised a simple cover using an eye-wrenching Bridget Riley painting. I had the appropriate quantity of covers printed and conveyed these and the stencils to Graham Boak, then in charge of the BSFA duplicator and supplies. Unfortunately the stencils and cover were both quarto, while the BSFA's vast stock of paper was all A4. This is why my first issue of *Vector* has immense margins at top and bottom, and no front cover... and why I'm still using as scrap paper sheets with a Bridget Riley reproduction and *Vector* 59 printed on the verso.

My reign lasted only two years and ten issues, though it seemed much longer at the time. I enjoyed most of it: I had a fairly free rein to indulge myself and basically did what I liked, while recognising that the BSFA's journal had to show a fairly broad church approach to science fiction. I got to correspond quite a lot with writers I admired, such as Philip Dick (whose stuff I'd happily publish even when it had nothing whatever to do with SF) and Gene Wolfe. I got a quite unjustified amount of credit from people who had forgotten that a magazine like *Vector* could appear on a regular schedule. (Rog Peyton was the last editor to have achieved that.) Since my day the magazine has had a disturbingly regular schedule, so current editors are burdened with more expectations than I ever had to contend with.

Eventually the negative aspects — the almost total lack of response from what was then a very passive membership, the demands it made upon my spare time, and finally a dispiriting printing fuck-up from the guy who was doing the work — caused me to resign. The BSFA organisation chose the same moment to stage its last full-scale collapse, so that although I prepare an issue 69 it was never printed. After a chaotic interregnum lasting a full year I finally managed to hand over the editorship to Chris Fowler, who retyped my issue and published it pretty much unchanged as his own, initiating a new phase in *Vector*'s illustrious history.

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

The Compromise: or, The Voice from the Gutter

What was I attempting to do with *Vector*? Kevin asked me. I had a clear idea at the outset, but whilst the clarity of the intention remains, little else survives.

I was editor from issue 84 through to the Worldcon issue -- number 94. I was noted for putting a picture of Ian Watson on a special Bob Shaw issue, and I committed the unpardonable sin of calling Mr Aldiss 'Brian' in print.

When I took the magazine over from Chris Fowler, the BSFA had potential debts of £1400, and had alienated all of its advertising outlets. I was to be the caretaker editor, as I had been the caretaker membership secretary. I drifted into the job: necessity, I guess. Necessity also meant that I had the parameters of the job set at the beginning of my editorship. Monetary problems meant that I was faced with at least six issues of a stencilled magazine. The idea was to provide *Vector* with a set of contents which compensated for its poor appearance and habit of leaping at you when its staples gave out. Pressure of time and the need to provide continuity in the face of chaos meant that my first issue utilised 75% of a personal magazine -- including an unsuited cover -- in which I gave my first (and, some would say, constant) editorial comment.

My intentions?

- 1) To broaden the reviewing base of the magazine -- and essentially this meant involving people who wouldn't normally get involved (which occasioned numerous pleading letters to overworked authors) -- and by that means to inject new blood and new ideas into the magazine.
- 2) To plan in advance what articles, interviews and incidental matter (including artwork) I required for each forthcoming issue. This entailed soliciting articles and lugging a cassette recorder to wherever I could track down an SF author willing to talk about his work.
- 3) To create a 'continuity of argument' within the magazine -- both in the form of polemical articles and within the letter column.
- 4) With regard to the material drawn upon, I wanted to ignore -- as far as it was possible to -- the whole mass of reprinted matter, and deal with the *emergent* forms of science fiction, as well as opening the minds of *Vector's* readership to that whole mass of material that could be said to be hovering on the genre's borders -- fiction typified by Borges, William Burroughs, Hesse, Tennant and Zamiatin.

The problems that faced me?

- 1) *Vector* is a society magazine. Specifically, it is a magazine designed to cater for Science Fiction. (People liked to tell me that, in case I was perhaps too dense to realise it. Perhaps I was.) SF is a pretty crude genre when you come down to it. A committee was at my back constantly (though, to be fair to them, they conceded points more often than I) and I had to *compromise* as far as my coverage of material was concerned. I had to try to please everyone. But I am an independent fellow, and that irked me badly. I published much that wasn't to my taste -- and I think my distaste for it, as much as the material itself, acted adversely on the magazine.
- 2) The greater proportion of the SF audience is apathetic. Any attempt to create a 'continuity of argument' seems doomed. The same voices are repeatedly heard. All others are indifferent, or, if potentially interested, are too busy earning their crust elsewhere.
- 3) I ended by writing most of the articles simply because few others were willing to invest the time and effort crafting a good article. Also I rewrote much of what was submitted, but discovered that this was rather a pointless exercise. It was ultimately quicker (and, with an issue every two months, speed was of the essence) to trust to reliable friends or produce the goods myself. Again, the committee wanted me to print much that was, to my mind, poor criticism, simply to retain the illusion

of a Society Magazine -- that *anyone* could contribute. There was a compromise here, but it was the least of them all. I was unwilling to lessen the quality of the thing. Nevertheless...

4) I learned that those people who want to review and write for *Vector* will find you, not you they. It was almost impossible to broaden the reviewing base at that time. I was unhappy with much of what I put in the review columns -- there was far too much padding, far too much that was simply irrelevant -- but, again, the need to cover a wider range of SF (the committee's intention, to which I acquiesced) and the impossibility of finding non-paid, talented reviewers (other than the few I began with) was against me. I retained the familiar voices mainly because they were tried and tested and -- oh, how important *that* was -- *reliable*!

I could go on. I could enumerate many other intentions and problems. Let the above stand, let it suffice as an outline. Some of the process I enjoyed immensely -- the author interviews in particular, if not the later necessity of transcription. I also (perversely as it may seem) enjoyed the battle -- fought bi-monthly for two years -- to beat the two month deadline. I believe I didn't miss one. And the fun of laying-out when litho was made available to me was an unexpected bonus. But would I do it again? No, I think not. I felt that I was, if not a bad editor, then the *wrong* editor for *Vector*. With a society magazine you do *have* to try to please *most* of your audience, and I, arrogant as I am, tried to please *myself*. If I injected some vitality, then that perhaps was a small success. For the rest, I failed.

Good luck, Kevin...

KEVIN SMITH (99-?)

How high a number will that '?' represent eventually, I wonder? It may be tempting fate to say certainly higher than 100, but that is my intention. I already have some material for 101, and I want to use it...

Looking back at the list of editors, and at what some of them had to say, I am truly amazed that *Vector* has lasted this long. Always, it seemed, someone would come forward for just long enough, and then someone else, and so on. There have been 24 editors (more or less, depending on how you count them) for those 100 issues, most of them lasting for just one or two. Four editors -- Rog Peyton, Malcolm Edwards, Chris Fowler and David Wingrove -- between them edited 50 issues, precisely half, and the BSFA owes them a special debt. I am fortunate that the last three came one after the other, leading up to Mike Dickinson and myself -- fortunate not so much that they have made it easy for me to be editor (in fact, quite the reverse, for they set high standards of content and regularity which will be difficult to live up to) but that in providing long term stability (in the BSFA two years is long term) they have enabled an organisation to grow around *Vector* and the other BSFA publications to such an extent that that I do not have to worry about printing, collating, stapling, addressing, posting and other distribution (though they insist that I turn up for mailing sessions). More than that, I also have a reviews editor, Joseph Nicholas, who handles everything to do with book reviews, except the final decision of whether to publish them or not; and Eve Harvey is prepared to help out with the typing if necessary.

Quite frankly, I wouldn't have volunteered to take on the editorship under any other terms, and my admiration for those who did, and persisted, is enormous.

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

Bruce the pilot acknowledged this with a bit of a grunt. "Uh huh..." he managed to let out between his teeth.

And now not a soul in the world would be any of the wiser as to what secret of the speechless minnows he held and had not divulged. And all because of the insalubriousness of a rock cavity.

A TELEGRAM FOR VECTOR

Alan Dorey

In case you hadn't noticed, this is the 100th issue of *Vector*, a remarkable achievement for as ostensibly amateur magazine. Started soon after the birth of the BSFA, in 1958, *Vector* has moved through the sixties and seventies with a demonstrative display of self-preservation. There was a slight hiccup in the mid-seventies, but we don't generally talk about that; after all, if cats are allowed nine lives, why shouldn't the official organ of the BSFA also be?

These days *Vector* is litho-printed on the BSFA's own machine, but of course it hasn't always been like that; most issues were run off on a duplicator (not necessarily the same one). However, an interesting flirtation with a more professional method of printing was made with issue 7, produced in early 1960. This number, measuring only 6" by 3", was one of those edited by Roberta Gray and produced by a youthful Mike Moorcock.

This time round *Vector* has a new look... unfortunately as we are still judging the costs of the new method we have had to cut down a little and there are only two pages of letters.

Now, where have I heard that before? Interestingly enough, the typeface was only half the size of that in current *Vectors*, although all the pages had justified margins. In those days there was no BSFA newsletter or *Matrix* and thus *Vector* was a strange pot pourri of articles, reviews, letters, secretary's reports and accounts. These latter items could bear a little investigation. For the half year to December 1959 income was £105 16s 1d, of which a mere £14 13s 11d was spent on postage for just over 150 members. That sounds a trifling amount compared with our current annual mailing expenditure of something in excess of £1300!

Vector also used to print a list of new members, and once a year a complete list of extant members. Thus we can see in issue 8 a Mr H. Harrison became member number 150. Number 8 also saw articles by Brian Aldiss, and Mike Moorcock, on the works of Mervyn Peake -- a foretaste of his future editorship of *New Worlds*, perhaps? Issue 9 saw a reprint of Arthur C. Clarke's short story from 1957, 'Travel by Wire', one of his earliest fiction excursions, and also a copy of the BSFA constitution. This was a mammoth four page affair and stated that "the subscription for Members shall be £1 per annum." Taking into account the ravages of inflation (a daily newspaper cost perhaps 2d in 1959) and the fact that each mailing today consists of at least three magazines, I don't consider the current £6 out of the way. If anything, I'd wager a year's free membership that members today are getting better value for money.

Reprints from 1950s fanzines were often used, generally by notables such as Bob Tucker and Archie Mercer. (This is something done occasionally today -- for example, Dave Langford's 'Genocide for fun and profit' in *Vector* 95.) Ken Slater used to write a column under the suitable title 'General Chunterings', and in issue 14 (Winter 1961/2) Kingsley Amis contributed an article he'd written for a talk to the London SF Group. It seems there's little new under the sun. *Vector* in the early 1960s had a laudable air of amateur enthusiasm, but as Bob Dylan was to say only a short while later, the times they are a-changing.

By 1963 Terry Jeeves was Chairman, *Vector* was edited by Jim Groves and duplicated by the late Mike Rosenblum, and Brian Aldiss did the book reviews. Little real change had occurred in its four years of existence. Jim Groves' editorial in issue 18 indicated some changes that would shape the future as far as SF in Britain was concerned:

By far and away the most notable event of 1962 was the emergence of a new, and important, name in the SF field. Not a writer this time, nor even an editor. Last year's biggest name was that of Victor Gollancz, the latest publisher to take to SF in a big way, and in my opinion the best yet in the British field.

It seems that Mr Groves' opinion has been served well over the years, as indeed have we, the reading public. Issue 21 carried a TAFF ballot -- candidates for the trip to the UK for the 1964 Eastercon were Marion Zimmer Bradley, Bruce Pelz and Wally Weber. The administrator was Ethel Lindsay, now tackling the last issues of her long-running fanzine, *Scottishe*.

Vector 23 saw the start of a standardised cover design, and page 2 announced that *Vector* now appeared eight times a year. Issue 7 aside, copies to date were duplicated on quarto sized paper, with hand cut stencils for illustrations by Terry Jeeves. Eddie Jones, the SF artist, designed the standard cover. It was used for a mere three issues. Famed author Christopher Priest (known then simply as "and C.M. Priest") was obviously spreading wide his net; starting with issue 23, Mr Priest drew several of the interior headings -- specifically that for the book review column. Charles Platt also made his presence known at this time, his fanzine *Point of View* being recommended by Archie Mercer. His letters to *Vector* complained about the fact that a loc writer's full address was never given:

If I want to write a personal letter to someone, I don't want to have to look out a list of BSFA members...

Eric Frank Russell wrote about the "Author's Lot" in *Vector* 25, whilst page 3 announced that 'the easiest way of getting right to the heart of things is to turn up at Ella Parker's flat on BSFA night... there's no need to book in advance.' Shades of today's Hammersmith meetings?

Change was in the air, and issue 26 ushered in jolly Roger Peyton as editor. The covers became more thoughtful, and the interior design and layout improved vastly. There were coloured stencil headings, photographic inserts and a much-improved typeface. And in the convention report on Peterborough appeared a fan panel -- "Does fandom need SF?" No doubt that question will arise once more at Leeds during Yorcon II next Easter.

Rog Peyton maintained a high standard of production, most of the contents appearing under regular headings and in standardised positions. Charles Platt asked of regular contributor "Dr Peristyle" in 1964, "When will man step on Mars or Venus?" The answer? "By 1971 at the latest." However, he was a little nearer the mark with 1983 as the date of the first interplanetary probe. Through into 1965 *Vector* saw a remarkable consistency; it was solid, dependable -- but with hindsight, it seemed to lack a little fire. The same people wrote to the letters page; the same names appeared in the reviews; the same sort of articles in each issue. Advertising first started in *Vector* 32, with an ad for *New Worlds*, then published by Roberts & Vintner.

Phil Harbottle was appearing regularly with a number of columns, each inciting a large mail response. He later moved on to edit the joint UK/Australian pro magazine *Vision of Tomorrow*. Graham Hall produced lucid, literate critical reviews of the prozines: "The July *Science Fantasy* (1965) is dominated by the first part of the novel -- 97 pages of it -- and the only room left is filled with an apallingly abysmal vignette by Johnny Byrne." Rog Peyton took a bold step forward with *Vector* 35: litho printed, a very professional looking cover, and altogether an attractive advertisement for the BSFA. Issue 37 carried an ad for *Tangent*, "the BSFA science fiction magazine featuring stories by today's leading writers, and by the best of the new -- 2/-." Future editor and fan about town Malcolm Edwards made his first appearance in issue 38, writing 'Behind the Scenes', a fan column -- and pretended a greater age than he actually was:

The obvious purpose of the BSFA is defined somewhere in those dusty passages of the Constitution (dusty because I haven't opened, or seen, my copy since it arrived in 1961.)

Malcolm was obviously cut out for this image; *Vector* 40 (edited now by Steve Oakey)

saw him saying:

I do hope that I'm not regarded as any Great Authority on things fannish, although I will admit when pushed that there are few others around still willing to put opinion to paper.

Vector 41 lapsed back into duplicated format, and by No.43 (1967) had become extremely scruffy in appearance. The cover was dreadful, and the contents lacked fire and imagination. Ken Slater and Doreen Parker, already overloaded with work, did their best, but *Vector* suffered -- as was apparent from the letter column. Members liked the litho issues, but called them frigid; disliked duplication, but loved the "friendly" atmosphere. Looking back, I consider that point of view strange -- although it must be remembered that *Vector* then was often the only contact members had with each other. Nowadays, *Vector* can concentrate on being a proper "Journal of SF", leaving *Matrix* as the members forum.

The next few *Vectors* varied wildly in layout, design, content and editors. 47 saw a Damon Knight article, 48 a 'resignation' letter from Harry Harrison (pressure of work). Issue 50 saw the editorship pass to Michael Kenward, who is now editor of *New Scientist*. None was particularly distinguished, although 52 was a special fiction issue -- a brave attempt, containing material by J.G. Chapman, George Gibson, Rob Holdstock and Michael G. Coney. Issue 54 had a glossy cover, was well balanced and led into 55, titled *Vector SF Review*, with card covers, double column layout, justified margins, an article by John Brunner and a much bolder approach to editing. 56 improved upon this, with a marvellous typeface, very professional design, photographs and a great 'feel' and sense of achievement to it. Bob Parkinson was now editor, and *Vector* started the 1970s in great shape. It was short on letters, had little immediate affinity with the great unwashed membership, but was undeniably a great stride in the right direction. A pity, then, that *Vector* 57 was badly duplicated, lacked a central focus, and contents-wise was very much a 'miss': an editorial, two short articles and reviews -- not very lively. Nor was there any contact between the BSFA council and the members, a point Keith Freeman picked up on in a column in issue 58:

Firstly there is the problem that the officers of the BSFA can only normally communicate with each other by post -- this slows down decision making drastically.

Never was a truer word spoken; *Vector* 58 (July 1971) was the last for several months until 59 appeared in the spring of 1972, now edited by Malcolm Edwards. Change again was in the air, even if that issue, A4 duplicated, was held together by a loop of string in the top left-hand corner. Gray Boak was responsible for the duplication, and Malcolm quite happily announced on the front cover:

It is duplicated by Gray Boak. All blame for smears of ink should be directed at him.

The best was yet to come. With issue 60, *Vector* once more became litho printed, A5 size, as today, and began to take on the role denied it for the previous few issues. Philip Strick wrote a knowledgeable column on SF and the Cinema, Peter Roberts contributed a fine fannish column (the Fannish Inquisition -- just a tinge of Monty Python there), Bruce Gillespie (of *SF Commentary* fame) wrote an extended book review, whilst Chairman John Brunner weighed in with his Quest-of-Honour speech at the 1972 Swedish SF con. While lists of contents are often meaningless when taken in isolation I feel that to do that here is a useful indicator of *Vector*'s new flavour. Malcolm certainly added a certain flair to the editing. He produced tidy, clean, varied issues with a balanced mixture of reviews, articles, news, interviews and letters. In many ways, he laid the foundations upon which the modern *Vector* is based -- and did it with a degree of skill and, importantly, dry humour, an element that had been sadly lacking in previous issues. No.63 saw articles by Brian Aldiss and Harry Harrison, whilst 64 weighed in with Philip K. Dick, Bob Shaw and Poul Anderson. Certainly the members were seeing value for money -- and although Malcolm's high standards were reflected in a lack of ordinary members' letters (so many authors just *had* to write in, it seems), it can't be denied that he set the wheels in motion.

By the spring of 1974 events seemed to have consolidated into predictability. However, *Vector* 67/68, which appeared as a double issue, should have been an indicator of the turmoil that was to follow. After an unprecedented rush of new members to the BSFA after a piece in *Science Fiction Monthly*, the Association all but collapsed. *Vector* fell into a stateless limbo, eventually to re-appear in the summer of 1975 in the hands of Christopher Fowler. As Chris said:

Dora, who dislikes hyperbole, would disapprove strongly if I were to begin this first editorial with some triumphal statement such as: VECTOR LIVES!

He had big ideas for the magazine, which initially continued much of Malcolm's good work. The articles flowed, the letters came in, and *Vector* was very much alive. Book reviews took on a more important role, coming under the heading "The Infinity Box", and the page count increased. Issue 73 had 72 pages, a glossy cover and was especially notable for a fine interview with J.G. Ballard by Dave Pringle (now editor of *Foundation*) and Jim Goddard:

PRINGLE: What's the new novel called?

BALLARD: I call it 'The High Life' provisionally. I may change it.

Chris Fowler introduced a new standard of layout design, and certainly went for bold covers -- issue 76/77 bearing a sensitive piece by SF artist Brian Lewis. His effort on *Vector* was intense, and occasionally it seemed that grandeur got the better of him. Issue 79 burst upon the scene with micro-type, but was size A4, with a glossy cover by Carol Gregory and a whole host of advertisements. *Vector* was now much more than just a BSFA magazine, and had become far more intelligently disposed towards things science-fictional. *Star Wars* featured heavily in issue 82, just to show that the BSFA hadn't lost complete touch with the outside world -- and it was also worth remembering for a reprint of Bob Shaw's 1977 Eastercon speech, and an early Jim Barker - Chris Evans 'Half Life' cartoon.

Could Fowler maintain the standard, and his drive and enthusiasm? Apparently not. *Vector* 84 appeared in November 1977, duplicated, A4, wrap-around glossy cover, edited by Dave Wingrove. Dave himself appeared in youthful guise on the reverse, a photograph which raised the ire of two BSFA members. I fail to see why, especially when some of Judy Watson's earlier cartoons are viewed in the same light. His was a difficult task, taking over the glossy professionalism of Chris Fowler -- and his debts. Wingrove did well to keep *Vector* on the road at all, and though criticisms were levelled at various aspects of his policies, he successfully weathered the storm.

Dave introduced a more intellectual approach to editing *Vector*; occasionally his thoughts ran away with themselves, but he did get some interesting contributions and he did maintain the high standard of the reviews. Issue 88 saw an interview with Frank Herbert, and 89 was a special Robert Sheckley issue, also including an interview

BOB SHECKLEY: This is a test recording. Mr Sheckley is not here yet but his stand-in is going to warm up the tape recorder for you. Blah-blah-blah-blah.

By issue 91, sufficient money had been saved on wholly duplicated numbers, and Dave could return to litho issues, although initially with duplicated inserts. *Vector* began to increase its circulation by virtue of a larger membership. Mike Dickinson took over with *Vector* 95, returned it to A5 format and produced a fine balance of material. J.G. Ballard was interviewed again for issue 96, and 97 saw Chris Priest's important SFWA resignation piece, 'Outside the Whale'. Unfortunately, Mike felt he couldn't continue, and decided to relinquish the editorship. A committee produced issue 98 as an interim measure, which brought us to Kevin Smith with issue 99.

To him goes the honour of editing this special issue. I pay tribute to him and to all those who have gone before. I've only been around for a comparatively short while. I've dwelt at length on the early years, the forgotten years, and for that I make no apologies. For, charting the progress of the magazine, one thing becomes abundantly clear. *Vector* is alive, and has a fine future. Remember this milestone! I feel proud to see it through as Chairman, and I'm sure every member feels a similar pride. To *Vector*!

YOU REMEMBER
THAT STORY BY
ARTHUR C.
CLARKE?



'THE NINE
BILLION
NAMES
OF GOD'?

RIGHT,
RIGHT



THE ONE WHERE
THESE TIBETAN
MONKS GET A
COMPUTER TO
PRINT OUT ALL
THE NAMES...

AND WHEN THEY
GET THROUGH
THE LIST THE
UNIVERSE
COMES TO
AN END...



RIGHT



INTERESTING
PARALLEL, REALLY...
ARTHUR C. CLARKE
IS PRESIDENT OF
THE BSFA, AND
VECTOR IS JUST
PUBLISHING ITS
HUNDREDTH
ISSUE...

YES,
BUT...



DON'T
TELL
ME



THEY'RE NOT
TIBETAN
MONKS

NOT
THIS LOT,
ANYWAY

AND IT'S
ONLY A
HUNDRED...



AND THEY
DON'T
HAVE A
COMPUTER,
ONLY
A LOUSY
LITHO
MACHINE...

TRUE



BUT THEY
DO HAVE...

ALL
8,999,999,999
OF JOSEPH
NICHOLAS'S
REVIEWS...



SO
LOOK ON
THE BRIGHT
SIDE



THINK OF IT
AS BEING A
MERCIFUL
RELEASE

Editorial Towards a Critical Standard

Part II

Last time I ended my editorial with the concept of 'fairness', which prompted Joseph Nicholas to write to make sure I got it right. In theory, he said, fairness is "very laudable", but, he continued, "the basic trouble with being fair to a book...is that it can never fail any tests which you apply to it. At the same time one is stomping it for its bad points, one is also bending over backwards to acknowledge, and thereby excuse it for, its good ones." Don't let fairness get in the way of a good stomping, eh Joseph? Well, no, that isn't quite what he was saying (although there is concealed in his statement a hint that one shouldn't acknowledge the good points of a book). What Joseph meant, I think, is that he fears the concept of fairness might emasculate criticism, that it might lead critics to dig around for good points where there really aren't many, to balance -- 'fairly' -- the hordes of bad points staring them in the face. I can reassure you, Joe: that's not what I meant.

'Fairness' has many guises and crops up in many places, as we shall see as we go through the five 'critical steps' that I see as forming the framework of a critical standard. The first step is quite independent of the book or author or whatever is under review. It is that *the critic must be aware of his prejudices*. It is no use a critic denying that he is prejudiced, for I should not believe him. Everyone has prejudices, subjective preferences; they are nothing to be ashamed of, so long as their owner acknowledges them. The horrifying thing about racial prejudice, for example, is not that it exists, but that those possessed of it refuse to acknowledge it as a prejudice and consider it instead a perfectly rational thing to believe in. A critic who will not acknowledge his prejudices will not realise, either, how they colour his judgement, and is likely to make subjective statements believing them to be objective. I consider it necessary that, in any critical article or review, the critic make known his prejudices. Thus, to take a simple example, when a critic says he is generally bored by space opera we know how to interpret him when he states that a particular space opera is pretty boring; conversely we know it must be pretty damned good if he says he found it gripping, for it has overcome his prejudice. A bald statement that such and such a space opera is boring tells us nothing. It exists in a vacuum. We have nothing against which to judge it. Perhaps long exposure to a critic would tell us his prejudices, but that is difficult to achieve and of little use to a new reader.

It is unfair for a critic to pretend to objectivity, since it lends a spurious authority to his pronouncements. "This is so!" sounds much more convincing than "These are my prejudices and this is what I find", though the latter is a much more accurate reflection of the state of affairs in artistic judgements.

The next step in a critical evaluation, though the first in consideration of a particular work, is to *determine the author's intent*. The critic must work out -- or attempt to -- what the author intends or means by his creation. The intent may be deep or shallow, large or small, ambitious or limited, ranging, say, from an attempt to explain the universe to an attempt to entertain a reader for half an hour. Entertainment, pure and simple, is a valid aim of an author, though not a particularly ambitious one. If the critic is unable to determine the intent of the author either the work or the critic is abominable, and should be abolished. No evaluation is actually carried out at this step, but it is not the less important for that; an evaluation based on a misapprehension of the author's intent is of little value. If nothing else, how can one trust in other matters a critic who doesn't understand, or can't be bothered to understand, what the book is about?

The third step is the first evaluative one: *how well does the book achieve the intent?* In other words, does the book succeed on its own terms and within its own limitations?

Does the attempt to explain the universe actually explain the universe, or even get fairly close? Does the attempt to entertain a reader for half an hour actually give him thirty minutes entertainment? (Note that there is no attempt, as yet, to compare these two books.) If the book fails on its own terms then quite often there is no point in trying to assess it further -- though the critic must be on the alert for the 'noble failure', the enormously ambitious work that fails because it must. The attempt to explain the universe is doomed to failure, but it can fail marvellously or ignominiously.

It is obviously lacking in fairness to condemn a book for failing to achieve something it never once meant to. It is like saying that apples make poor orange juice, which of course they do, and nobody is surprised at the fact. The critic who indulges himself in berating the apples (perhaps because, after all, they are rotten apples and deserve berating) on the grounds that the orange juice produced from them is distinctly lacking in orangeness is taking the easy way out. Rather he should attempt to ascertain the rottenness of the apple as an apple, which is more difficult. The apple (or, in fact, book) may well be deserving of derision, but it is wrong to deride it for the wrong reasons. It is as if the police were to 'plant' false evidence on a criminal to facilitate his arrest and conviction, because it was proving too difficult to find the 'real' evidence to gain a conviction for the 'real' crime. The criminal might indeed be guilty, but that is not the point. If such were to become an established practice then a lot of innocent people (or, as it were, books) might find themselves unjustly convicted on false evidence. And, as a lesser consequence, the police (or, alternatively, the edifice of criticism) would become suspect and untrustworthy.

The next step is a *comparison of the book in question with other books of the same type*. Here is where we compare the apple with other apples, and see how rotten it is, or how firm and crisp. Only by comparison are we able to tell this. Of course the apple critic must be able to tell what is an apple and what isn't, because again it is unfair to compare it, even inadvertently -- especially inadvertently -- with an orange.

The final step is a *comparison with all other books*. Is this apple as good an apple as that orange is an orange? This is where things get tough, where prejudices tell and tempers rise, where the critic lays his knowledge and judgement on the line, and where I break off until next issue.

Or almost. These are the five steps that provide a critic with a framework in which to work. This is not to say that a critical article or review need necessarily display all five. The critic may have decided that the book is not at all ambitious and doesn't even succeed on its own terms, for example, and that therefore he will be wasting his time to compare it with any other books at all. Or he may have decided that the book is excellent and needs to be thrown into the arena with the best; in which case step five is the important one, and the earlier steps will be out of place in the resultant article. However, the critic must have made the evaluation of those steps in his own mind, if only to back up his opinion that the book is excellent.

Next time I am going to expound on comparisons of books, to expand the rather short paragraphs above on steps four and five. In the meantime I'd like to hear your opinions on what I've written here, and your ideas about comparisons. Joseph Nicholas, I know, has a 'three level' concept of critical evaluation, which is not just a condensation of my five steps, although it bears certain resemblances. In any event, you have about three months to think and write about it; next mailing is *Focus* time, and I'm going to have a short rest before returning to the fray with *Vector* 101. Merry Christmas and Happy New Year.

Kevin Smith

They were all but struck dumb as they perceived the incongruity of the lighted hall immediately below them as large as life and into which the gentle trickle of stagnant water was overflowing and spilling.

Who's driving the time machine?

Garry Kilworth

A statistician and a mathematician once fell in love with the same woman. The lady in question set her beaux a mutual problem: standing at the apex of an equilateral triangle she invited the two rivals on the other two angles to make their way towards her, but stipulated that they might only cover half the distance with each single move.

"Ah," said the mathematician. "I see that you do not love either of us -- for if we followed your instructions we should never reach you. Not wishing to make a fool of myself, I would rather withdraw from the contest."

"My friend," replied the statistician, "you are both too impetuous and too precise. I shall reach the lady, for all intents and purposes."

Precision is not the business of statisticians, who are prepared to accept that two plus two may, under certain circumstances, equal three or five. The forecaster would like it to be his business, but going by track records he would, alas, probably never even meet the lady, let alone make good his intent and purposes, which is my only excuse for introducing this article with such a corny and Chauvinistic story. Forecasting the future of SF is no different from forecasting anything else: accuracy depends a great deal on luck. Luck being the most fickle of creatures, forecasters have about as much right to success as the man who wanders along Brighton beach in the winter in the hope of running into Bianca Jagger. In fact when you look at it logically, forecasts are virtually worthless, but we seem to need this psychological void-filler to give us direction. We share Nature's abhorrence of a vacuum.

What, exactly, do we mean by Science Fiction? Best sellers? Worst sellers? Short stories in magazines? Collections, anthologies, novels? Paperbacks or hard covers? I intend only to define Science Fiction within the context of this article, which is: any published novel categorised by the publisher as Science Fiction, excluding those novels published by a Vanity Press. (I do not sneer at those who pay to publish their own books. I merely wish to exclude them because the rules regarding the publishing of such novels are completely different.)

Well, where is SF going? There are many influences at work, any one of which may cause a change in direction. What I am going to try to do is investigate how many hands are on the steering wheel and try to gauge the relative pressure of each. I shall leave it up to you to decide who is actually turning the corners.

As a writer myself I should like to be able to inform you all that the content of SF is wholly determined by the author. I should be so lucky. Before that happens we shall see Bianca Jagger sunbathing on Brighton pavilion lawn. In the nude. In January. In any case, many writers believe that their books write themselves. That is, they begin with a vague idea about where the novel is heading, but allow the story to develop naturally. For a start, the author is human and therefore subject to outside influences which indirectly find their way into the stories. However, ignoring these external manipulating forces for a moment, let's trace an SF novel through, from conception, to the point where it sits in the hands of the reader.

Theodore Roskive (a pseudonym of Helen Arkwright) writes a novel called Fermenting Sources, a holocaust novel with a difference: everybody survives except a handful of strong, self-reliant characters that flee to the Nevada desert and die of thirst. Helen is a brand new writer and the publisher's readers both give it the thumbs down. The publisher does not read it himself since he accepts the recommendations of his readers. (Had F.S. been Helen's fifth novel the publisher would have read it and perhaps overruled his readers. Her twenty-fifth novel would have been published in any case, even though everybody hated it, including the author.)

Thus Helen's grip on the wheel is momentarily loosened. It will not tighten again unless she finds a publisher to take her novel, or she writes another that is more acceptable to those nameless, sinister figures that lurk behind the publisher's cloak.

Let's say Fermenting Sources gets past the readers and the publisher himself decides to read the book. Depending on the publisher, the person that actually does the reading can range from the Chairman to the Editor that looks after the gardening and cookery section as well as SF. This editor often has to convince a Board of Directors that Helen's novel is going to turn the SF world on its head, and make money to boot, and therefore he/she has got to believe in both Helen and her direction. (Privately the editor may consider the novel to be mediocre but is convinced that the writer has promise worth an investment. Editors like to discover new writers.)

A letter arrives for Helen: "Dear Author, we love your novel but..." (And this is where another couple of hands start to vie for possession of the wheel.) The publisher wants changes. The ending is too depressing. One of the desert group should be allowed to live.

This is a first novel, and though she has faith in her own judgement and ability, Helen is not impervious to suggestions which might improve the work. She does the changes. The book is finally accepted and Helen gets herself an agent who has certain ideas about where she should go in the future.

Fermenting Sources sells to a paperback publisher. The paperback editor suggests one or two more minor changes. An American publisher is interested, but wants a complete rewrite. (The desert group should be permitted to die to a man, woman and child -- but so should the rest of the population.) A new title is also required.

Publishing day arrives. Helen sees the cover illustration for the first time. She is pleasantly surprised. She actually likes it. Nobody else does, however, especially the booksellers, who subscribed a minimal amount. The distributor almost rejects the novel because of a passage containing explicit sex. (The distributor rejects it? It can happen. It does happen.)

The driver's seat is becoming pretty crowded and the reader isn't anywhere in sight yet.

Next to board the machine are the critics and reviewers. There is a difference between the two. Reviewers present a balanced judgement. Critics are often destructive. I shall mix my metaphors. Reviewers are wasps who sometimes sting, but the attack is quick, clean and without malice. The Critic, on the other hand, is a mosquito. There's always one there, whining away in the dark, and it leaves several marks which irritate for some time afterwards. When you finally swot it you find the smear contains your own blood.

There's not a lot the reviewers and critics can do to Fermenting Sources apart from possibly inhibiting its sales, which are mainly to libraries in any case. (It's an arguable point whether the readers are actually influenced by the professionals.) But they can do much to Helen. She may be so disillusioned by their attacks that she writes a fantasy novel next time. Or a thriller. Or an historical romance. SF may have lost one of its great pathfinders.

The above account may seem a little cynical in places and the layers are laid rather

thickly, but essentially they are all possibilities. Foretelling the future of SF -- in itself an ambiguous exercise since one is trying to foresee the future's idea of the future's future -- is particularly fraught with underlying persuasions beyond the control of the writer. There are other influences: subtle ones, such as writers' workshops and other authors; less subtle ones, such as legislation and protest groups.

Then there is the reader.

If the reader does not buy then Helen might be forced to take another direction. There are no hard and fast rules, however, and Helen's work could be of a very high literary standard, yet not necessarily commercial. A publisher might feel that her work, though it does not make the house any money, enhances its reputation. Therefore, even if the book shows disastrous sales, Helen can continue writing what she wants to write as long as she feels the need. Or the need drives away her feel. On the other hand the novel may be slight and uncommercial and Helen either writes a subsequent but brilliant novel or becomes a fossil in the evolutionary process of survival in the world of books.

So these are the hands upon the wheel of the time-machine:

the author	the distributor
the publisher	the bookseller
the agent	the publisher's reader
the reading public	the artist
reviewers	critics
writers' workshops	existing writers
legislation	protest groups

There must be more. The BSFA, for instance. The SF awards. Fanzines. Vector (?!?) Above all, one should not under-estimate the power of the distributors and booksellers. If Helen's book rates only one star in a bookseller's marketing exercise then she'll only make the major stores. Station bookstalls and street corner bookshops will not have the opportunity to display the novel. I am told the cover illustration is important to the bookseller, and possibly the title, both of which may have little to do with the content of the book. Certainly booksellers cannot be expected to read all the books they sell. They will be influenced by reputation, previous sales and visual impact. It means, of course, that when Helen is an established and respected author she will be able to exert much more pressure on the wheel, but by that time she may have done her part in steering the machine: the future is in the hands of the new, the younger writer.

I will finish with an allegorical example of the difficulties in forecasting the future of SF. The time-machine waits to be driven into the future. First, someone has to find the key. Once the machine is ready to move, one or two of its co-drivers are trying to switch from manual to automatic, while the driver is desperately fighting for control. The brakes are bad and outside influences interfere with the magnetic flux of the motor and the direction in which the machine is heading. Time winds and other elemental forces buffet the machine this way and that, and there is a fifty-fifty chance of materialising inside a solid mountain of granite during one of the many stops. The machine is called Odysseus, but there's no Penelope, and Ithaca is a mythical destination at the end of an eternal journey to its location on the far side of infinity.

It was as if whatever device the object carried, induced in them a stupor of complete submission to another will more omnipotent than their own.

Kurt Semen had repeatedly been jailed for disturbing the peace and inciting unnecessary pathos...

Many answers he gave were tautologous as he and his colleagues had had to guess at them.

DIGGING UP THE FUTURE

Dave Langford

Quite often, almost too often, we are reminded by SF's ever-industrious archaeologists that fantastic literature did not begin only when *Amazing Stories* first hacked its way from the forehead of H. Gernsback. Of course nobody has ever forgotten Verne and Wells, however much the world would be improved by a little judicious forgetting of a good deal of Verne and remembering of Wells' non-fantastic work. Of course Verne and Wells had numerous predecessors and followers which historically-minded critics like Brian Stableford or Chris Morgan can haul up and display to us: fascinating or repulsive creatures of the deep water, knobblily with odd-shaped concepts and phosphorescent with bad writing. However, the tunnel vision of the SF field is capable of missing things much more plainly on view. A writer can keep the wrong company: John D. Macdonald would probably be thought of as a better SF writer of his period, had he not gone on to make his pile from colourful thrillers. A writer can eclipse himself: if Huxley's *Brave New World* weren't so tediously and traditionally a book which Must Be Read, we might hear a bit more about his *After Many a Summer* or *Ape and Essence* (for example) in the fantastic literature context. And a writer can be so versatile and too-damn-brilliant that nobody trusts him: a writer of notable fantasy, detective fiction, essays, verse, apologetics, polemic, plays, biography, criticism, you name it; a writer who's always had something in print since 1900 and who is repeatedly rediscovered and discussed by the literary world at large, but not by the SF world. Which is strange, as five of his six novels are undeniably speculative.

The author is of course G.K. Chesterton (1874-1936), who is perhaps most remembered for his 49 'Father Brown' detective stories. (Which is not to dismiss these 'mere' detective tales: they form the only body of short works comparable to Conan Doyle's, are notably better written, and include some of the best detective stories ever written, often with a fantastic glamour of the seemingly supernatural. Try 'The Sign of the Broken Sword' or 'The Honour of Israel Gow' in *The Innocence of Father Brown* (collection, 1911).) I can't help suspecting that had he written less non-fantastic material, Chesterton would have received more attention in *The Encyclopaedia of SF* than his present few inches and the epitaph 'Though he wrote some SF, most of his numerous works fall into various other categories.'

Chesterton was at core a lover of the fantastic. His first notebook scribbles at the age of 17 or 18 -- posthumously published in *The Coloured Lands* (1938) -- were full of demons and monsters hilariously treated; to the end of his life, in essays and polemic, he would invariably choose the most fantastic and ridiculous metaphors to further his arguments. This, he explained, not only made them more interesting to read but was a genuine test of intellectual rigour; if an argument worked in a vague sort of way when applied to political abstractions or Platonic ideals, but became absurd when one tried to use it on more solid things such as pigs, elephants or Chesterton himself (he liked to joke about his huge bulk), then possibly it might not be a good argument. Here he defends farce and might as well be defending SF:

...If the other forms of art had been despised, they would have been equally despicable. If people had spoken of 'sonnets' with the same accent with which they speak of 'music-hall songs', a sonnet would have been a thing so fearful and wonderful that we almost regret we cannot have a specimen; a rowdy sonnet is a thing to dream about. If people had said that epics were only fit for children and nursemaids, *Paradise Lost* might have been an average pantomime... For who would trouble to bring to perfection a work in which even perfection is grotesque? Why should Shakespeare write *Othello* if even his triumph consisted in the eulogy, 'Mr Shakespeare is fit for something better than writing tragedies'? (*The Defendant*, 1901)

The first of Chesterton's novels was *The Napoleon of Notting Hill* (1904), which

begins in a London of 1984 -- mere coincidence -- startlingly like that of 1904. A delightful prologue explains --

The human race, to which so many of my readers belong, has been playing at children's games from the beginning, and will probably do it till the end, which is a nuisance for the few people who grow up. And one of the games to which it is most attached is called 'Keep to-morrow dark', and which is also named (by the rustics in Shropshire, I have no doubt) 'Cheat the Prophet'. The players listen very carefully and respectfully to all that the clever men have to say about what is to happen in the next generation. The players then wait until all the clever men are dead, and bury them nicely. They then go and do something else. That is all. For a race of simple tastes, however, it is great fun. (*Several satirical pages on prophecy follow.*)

...Then the people went and did what they liked. Let me no longer conceal the painful truth. The people had cheated the prophets of the twentieth century. When the curtain goes up on this story, eighty years from the present date, London is almost exactly like what it is now.

Another Chesterton preoccupation, mediaevalism and pageantry, soon intrudes. In 1984 the King of England, chosen by lot from the Civil Service, is the peculiarly humorous Auberon Quin (said to be based on Max Beerbohm). As a joke on all London, Quin decrees that the London boroughs be restored to their 'old independence' under Lord Provosts, compelled to build individual city walls, their officials decked in ornate costumes, a wealth of ridiculous detail:

"...It is usual -- it is usual -- that is all, for a man when entering the presence of Royalty to lie down on his back on the floor and elevating his feet towards heaven (as the source of Royal power) to say three times, 'Monarchical institutions improve the manners.'"

All goes well for twenty years or so, the King still enjoying the joke of respectable City men performing the elaborately silly rituals of his decree (shades of Gormenghast!) -- until the new Provost of Notting Hill, a mediaeval throwback, chooses to take the King quite seriously. He asserts the independence of Notting Hill and his own right to repel by force of arms the foul commercialism of Bayswater and Kensington, who wish to put a by-pass through his fiefdom. And there's war: with pikes and halberds as the only weapons permitted by Royal decree, with cunning plays like the commandeering of cabhorses for cavalry, the turning out of streetlamps in one crucial battle and the threatened flood from the waterworks in another. All the improbabilities are held together by careful realism and observation (and even by Chesterton's irreverence and love of paradox -- his vision is solid enough to stand up to being joked about). Here's how to write a battle report:

"When something happens, it happens first, and you see it afterwards. It happens of itself, and you have nothing to do with it. It proves a dreadful thing -- that there are other things besides one's self. I can only put it in this way. We went round one turning, two turnings, three turnings, four turnings, five. Then I lifted myself slowly up from the gutter where I had been shot half senseless, and was beaten down again by living men crashing on top of me, and the world was full of roaring, and big men rolling about like ninepins."

Doesn't that feel *right*? Reading this some fifteen years ago has always made me suspicious of those battles so common in sword-and-sorcery, where every hack of every blade is followed with millimetric precision -- as though the author had filmed the action and was going through it frame by frame with protractor and dividers. (Ursula LeQuin, as you might have guessed, knows all about this: the Chestertonian approach is used for the climactic confrontation in *The Eye of the Heron*.) In the end Quin and the throwback Provost are left in the darkness of the last battlefield (Chesterton abandoned logic when he wished, and this scene is spoilt if you start asking what happened to everyone else) to realise they are complements, a lunatic with no sense of humour and a lunatic with nothing else. And the reader is left with what amounts to mental indigestion: there's been wit, shrewd reasoning, more than adequate characterisation, exciting action, uproarious farce, mysticism, philosophy, marvellous description (Chesterton studied as a painter and always had an eye for light on the

landscape -- you could collect whole bouquets of amazing dawns and sunsets from his work, no two alike)... This is an astonishingly crammed first novel which stands any amount of rereading.

Nor was *Napoleon* a flash in the pan: four years later Chesterton did it again and did it better with *The Man Who Was Thursday* (1908), subtitled 'A Nightmare'. All the old skills are here, improved by -- or despite -- four years of journalism; the plot is even more preposterous but at the same time more coherent. I need hardly summarise this one: SF booksellers may not stock it, the fools, but a Penguin Modern Classics edition is more or less perpetually in print. Briefly: there appears to be a vast anarchist conspiracy against world civilization, chillingly summed up in the lines

"They have but two objects, to destroy first humanity and then themselves. That is why they throw bombs instead of firing pistols. The innocent rank and file are disappointed because the bomb has not killed the king; but the high-priesthood are happy because it has killed somebody."

Which seems almost more topical nowadays than one is happy about. At the head of the anarchists are seven members of the Central Council, who take their names from the days of the week. The hero, Syme, after a few chapters of argumentative fireworks (which have enough serious content and relevance to make Wilde's look silly), bluffs his way into the position of Thursday on the Council. Syme, you see, is a policeman of a decidedly jolly branch which carries cards inscribed 'The Last Crusade'; much of the book is concerned with horrific encounters and comic unveilings of Council members, since (NB if I felt that a good book could genuinely be spoilt by preknowledge of revelations, I would do a Spider Robinson here and warn you not to read the rest of this sentence.) each other member of the Council bar Sunday, the terrifying President, proves to be another policeman. This sounds like knockabout farce, but there's more here than that. Not only has Chesterton retained the old skills, he's acquired a new one -- the ability to convey a sense of evil. Even in their masks, and even when you know the masks are masks, the members of the Council of Days exude a kind of oblique horror foreshadowing what C.S. Lewis tried to do with NICE personnel in *That Hideous Strength*...

He knew that each one of these men stood at the extreme end, so to speak, of some wild road of reasoning. He could only fancy, as in some old-world fable, that if a man went westward to the end of the world he would find something -- say a tree -- that was more or less than a tree, a tree possessed by a spirit; and that if he went east to the end of the world he would find something else that was not wholly itself -- a tower, perhaps, of which the very shape was wicked. So these figures seemed to stand up, violent and unaccountable, against an ultimate horizon, visions from the verge. The ends of the earth were closing in.

The novel has the usual sacrifice of logic to mood; if Chesterton wants a snowstorm five minutes after an open-air breakfast in Leicester Square, he just puts it in. It becomes a horrific chase of Syme and his revealed allies, and then a farcical chase after the President himself (who flees by cab, elephant, balloon, etc, flinging nonsensical messages to the pursuers -- "What about Martin Tupper now?"), and suddenly an allegory. A spanner is thrown into the allegorical works by the appearance of one *real* anarchist to confront the false ones; and in the end it *may* all have been a dream. It's an annoying, unforgettable, marvellous book. If I had the *chutzpah* of Joe Nicholas I would make it compulsory reading for all BSFA members and shout at those who failed to re-read it every year.

Chronologically the next Chesterton fantasia is *The Ball and the Cross* (1910); I first mention *The Flying Inn* (1914), for two reasons. Firstly, this and those already discussed have long been available in an omnibus edition and I find it hard to separate them; secondly, *The Ball and the Cross* is a slightly different and less luxuriant breed of fantasy. *The Flying Inn* is a 'contemporary' novel for 1914 and deals with something very like Prohibition, on English soil. The chiliastic terror of *Thursday* is abandoned and a new subtlety of character introduced. There are still comic turns, accentuated by dollops of light verse (Chesterton made almost a whole separate book, *Wine, Water and Song* (1915) from this incidental verse): but when the

dust has settled one remembers Ivywood, the fanatical Temperance peer (as opposed to the Lords Spirituous, no doubt) whose mania leads him through Prohibition to Islam, treason and utter dementia; or his admirer Lady Joan Brett, gradually realising that among his lordship's great reforms may well be the instituting of the harem with herself as Wife No. 1; or the avant-garde poet Dorian Wimpole, who sings the virtues of oysters, sharks and other 'creatures that man forgets' until marooned in a wood with a donkey to learn a healthier attitude towards the thing Chesterton felt really important -- the indiscriminate mass of people. Also there is the amazing Misysra Ammon, 'Prophet of the Moon', with his theory that all English culture derives from Islam:

"Why, my good friends, the very name of that insidious article by which you make strong your drinks is an Arabic word: alcohol. It is obvious, is it not, that this is the Arab article 'Al' as in Alhambra, as in Algebra; and we need not pause here to pursue its many appearances in connexion with your festive institutions, as in your Alsop's beer, your Ally Sloper, and your partly joyous institution of the Albert Memorial."

Here too is Chesterton's cruel satire on Garden Cities, and the drinking song with the lines "Cocoa is a cad and coward, /Cocoa is a vulgar beast," by which subtle means GKC 'resigned' as journalist for the Cadbury-owned newspapers. The plot concerns a very tiny underground movement of two or three men who eventually lead the revolt against Ivywood: this is familiar to us now, and not quite convincing, but Chesterton comes so close to pulling it off that he outshines hundreds of later users of the revolutionary theme in SF. Part of the secret is a carefully limited scale: Chesterton's early-twentieth-century England seems small enough for a single man to wake and shake the country, while a world (or an empire of worlds) does not.

His strengths can be seen leading him towards obscurity. In his own lifetime the writing of such fantasies was going out of fashion and even being thought vaguely reprehensible. Critics had always said tut-tut to his practice of putting farce next to serious argument or gorgeous landscape descriptions verging on the purple; critics were moving towards what was called realism and meant writing books all on one dismal note irrespective of reality. Worse, GKC's speculation was sociological: rather than introduce an alien menace in the Wells manner, he extrapolated internal trends like the decay of the monarchy, the rise of terrorism or the temperance craze. Thus, while 'mainstream' critics put him aside on the 'minor classics' shelf, he was never really picked up by the pulp-fed SF fans or critics: people who can still enjoy a Martian invasion in the nineteenth century are less happy with London's civil war in a 1904 mislabelled 1984, the latter being thought 'dated' and the former not. Nonsense, say I. Perhaps the swing towards soft SF could lead to a Chesterton revival -- though not, please, not at the ichor-bespattered hands of Lin Carter.

The other fantasy which should still be read is *The Ball and the Cross* (1910), where-in GKC's religious feelings come out of the closet. I should assure you that lumpen proselytization does not intrude into the fiction, although the attitude is there as it is in R.A. Lafferty -- another GKC fan. By this time Chesterton had published his brilliant Catholic justification *Orthodoxy* (1908), which however eccentric in its reasoning still makes C.S. Lewis' comparable efforts -- excluding, perhaps, *Screwtape* -- look still more drab and lacklustre than they are. That's the second time Lewis has cropped up: what I tell you three times is true...

The Ball and the Cross deals with a believer and an atheist, both sympathetically presented, who take their argument regarding blasphemy to the point of agreeing to duel. Thus they are pursued through England by policemen etc. incapable of thinking anything worth fighting over, least of all religion. The intending duellists are helped and hindered in a series of parable-like encounters, for example with a vaguely Swinburnian pagan who wants them to fight in his garden for the glory of human sacrifice and suchlike: they decline to do so. The last section is the weirdest, with the heroes shut in a vast loony-bin containing every sane person they've met en route, and, it emerges, perhaps every sane person in the world. The proprietor of this place is indeed the devil, who attempts to 'break' our heroes in a psychological manner foreshadowing C.S. Lewis' passages in *That Hideous Strength* about the Object-

ive Room and the process of killing off the humanity in NICE neophytes. Indeed it's hardly too much to say that Lewis ripped off the idea wholesale --

The shape of his cell specially irritated him. It was a long, narrow parallelogram, which had a flat wall at one end and ought to have had a flat wall at the other; but that end was broken by a wedge or angle of space, like the prow of a ship. ...This angle at the end began to infuriate Turnbull. It maddened him to think that two lines came together and pointed at nothing. ...Above all he had a hatred, deep as the hell he did not believe in, for the objectless iron peg on the wall. (*The Ball and the Cross*)

...The room was ill proportioned, not grotesquely but sufficiently to cause dislike. Mark felt the effect without analysing the cause... Then he noticed the spots on the ceiling; little round black spots at irregular intervals.. (*That Hideous Strength*)

And both books end in similar ruin and disaster for the baddies: personally I prefer Chesterton's more ambiguous physical conflagration to Lewis' fire from heaven (only Stephen King in *The Stand* can boast a more egregious *deus ex machina*), but obviously I must be wrong, for *The Ball* is relatively obscure whilst *That Hideous Strength* is constantly reprinted. Like *The Man Who Was Thursday*, *The Ball* could well be subtitled 'a nightmare', beginning in story and ending in allegory. It and the other three mentioned are the major Chesterton fantasies and are well worth reading if you can find them. A personal aside: when critics speak of 'major' books which are 'essential reading' I frequently cringe at the worthy dullness somehow implied. Chesterton is nowhere dull in these novels; there's a constant crackle of wit, energy and invention; I assure you that long ago when I first read one of them, the youthful and dubious Langford looked into it somewhere in the middle, was hooked, and read happily to the end despite certain resulting obscurities.

Some other works should at least be mentioned. *Tales of the Long Bow* (1925) is a rather silly set of linked stories wherein figures of speech are laboriously brought to life, an example being that of the political crusader informed that he'll never set the Thames on fire with his rhetoric: thanks to the floating industrial wastes he's crusading against, he has little difficulty in doing so. (How's that for an early environmental story?) Eventually there is successful revolution in England, something also featuring in the linked detective-story collection *The Man Who Knew Too Much* (1922). The detective puzzle format was a fatal temptation to GKC: he could handle it well, as with Father Brown, but would often hang plots on the flimsiest puzzles -- a favourite theme being that where all the evidence makes X guilty, and a blinding flash of revelation turns the clues upside down to prove X both laudable and innocent. The formula can pall. It gave rise to a novel, *Mamaliva* (1911), which is no fantasy but important enough to have been called the decisive test of a Chesterton fan. Here the dotty hero does things like burgle numerous houses or court numerous women for the love of adventure; a moral chap, he is duly revealed as having burgled only houses which he happens to own and eloped with (in various disguises) his own wife. The parable -- GKC's constant reiteration that the commonplace is wonderful if approached in the right way -- runs away with the author. And the constant use of the final-revelation plot structure is horribly easy for someone as inventive as Chesterton, and reduces whole tracts of his work to slightly more 'literary' versions of the sting-in-the-tail short story we have all read too often. Eventually his formula writing, his endless defences of Catholicism and the almost forgotten political movement Distributism, and the strain of editing a magazine 'inherited' from his dead brother Cecil almost ruined him as a writer.

In *The Return of Don Quixote* (1927), mediaeval pageantry is again introduced into English politics, but with an older and more disillusioned Chesterton realising quite accurately that cloaks, tunics and hose cannot make a wet politico any more dynamic, however much he proclaims his born-again status. The book is intelligent but dull. 'The Sword of Wood' (1928) is an almost science-fictional squib about an 'enchanted' sword which beats all comers but is defeated by the hero's walking stick. It was magnetised, you see... The play *Magic* (1913), though hardly a notable play, is an interesting fantasy wherein a trafficker in magic performs a miracle -- and a

nearly sceptic almost goes mad at the revelation, necessitating that the magician save the day by devising a means whereby the miracle could have been faked. There's another one with some present-day applicability. Another and posthumous play *The Surprise* (1952, written circa 1930) is a direct religious allegory about omnipotence and free will, which needn't concern us here (the *Vector* editor being adequately supplied with these qualities).

I hope I've given some idea of Chesterton's vast versatility, even while leaving more than 90 of his books out of the reckoning. His style must receive a special mention, though, since it's unique. He loved to argue by free-association in a series of paradoxes ('truth standing on its head to attract attention') spiced with puns, alliteration and grotesquerie; sometimes his echolalia of words and ideas failed to work, but more often it succeeded brilliantly. 'Brilliant', the critics would say with that delicate intonation that made GKC remark, "The word brilliant has long been the most formidable weapon of criticism..." As a sample, here's part of an argument from *Orthodoxy*, and a widely applicable argument it is:

...The common phrase for insanity is in this respect a misleading one. The madman is not the man who has lost his reason. The madman is the man who has lost everything except his reason. The madman's explanation of a thing is always complete, and often in a purely rational sense satisfactory... The insane explanation is quite as complete as the sane one, but it is not so large. A bullet is quite as round as the world, but it is not the world. There is such a thing as a narrow universality; there is such a thing as a small and cramped eternity; you may see it in many modern religions. ...The strongest and most unmistakable mark of madness is this combination between a logical completeness and a spiritual contraction. The lunatic's theory explains a large number of things, but it does not explain them in a large way. I mean that if you and I were dealing with a mind that was growing morbid, we should be chiefly concerned not so much to give it arguments as to give it air, to convince it that there was something cleaner and cooler outside the suffocation of a single argument...

(I wonder if our old pals Erich von Daniken and Brad Steiger ever read Chesterton?)

Later in life GKC virtually parodied himself, often writing mechanical essays without real thought behind them -- caught in the wheels of his own style. The ever-present deadlines dragged him down; in 1938 Cyril Connolly's *Enemies of Promise* was to identify journalism as the worst enemy of the creative writer -- and despite much good stuff like the posthumous *Autobiography* (1936), the later Chesterton is a horrible example of this truth.

As well as the formidable weapons of his style and wit, GKC at his best had that feeling for the commonplace, the redeeming realistic detail which holds up an author's colossal tower of fantasy like a guyrope. Ursula LeGuin, in 'Science Fiction and Mrs Brown', explained how real, commonplace people are needed if SF's galaxy-spanning empires are to work, that without the transmuting touch of realism they are mere cardboard. Chesterton thought that way too, and quite fortuitously summed up the feeling while dedicating a poem to his wife...

Up through an empty house of stars,
Being what heart you are,
Up the inhuman steep of space
As on a staircase go in grace,
Carrying the firelight on your face
Beyond the loneliest star.

(*The Ballad of the White Horse*, 1911)

I could go on quoting Chesterton interminably, but through sheer humanity will desist. Read, if you can and if you haven't, the books mentioned above in tones of respect; after so very many unreadable 'classics of forgotten SF' it's an enormous relief to find someone who can write and write well. A rediscovery of Chesterton's fantasies is long overdue; and if Alan Dorey asks me nicely I'll even take the first step by producing a bibliography of all his fiction.

Let Us Now Re-appraise Famous Men

ANDREW M STEPHENSON

The annual OMNI lectures, it appears to this observer, afford fertile ground for cynicism.

The second was given on the 10th of September 1980, at the Royal Institution, London. The series was begun in October 1979, partly thanks, it seems, to the efforts of the late Dr Christopher Evans, who should be well known to the SF community for his one-time association with New Worlds and his continuing interest in combinations of cybernetics and psychology. The recent ITV series based on his book, The Mighty Micro, has also brought him some posthumous fame. He was a good worker and a decent human being; and there's not much better that any of us can hope to have said about us after we're gone. R.I.P.

However, I feel that his memory is not being well served.

The stated aim of the OMNI lectures is "to focus attention on frontier science, and on exciting ideas that lie between the realms of science fact and science fiction." (Press hand-out, 10 Sept 80)

To this end, Arthur C Clarke was invited to speak this year, his chosen subject being "Towards a Space Elevator", this being a matter which has much excited him and his publishers of late, and one which it appears is currently worth a bit of useful publicity.

The perceptive reader may have detected in that last paragraph a hint of the cynicism to which I alluded at the outset. If so, take one gold star for acuity. This observer was not impressed by Mr Clarke's scientific detachment nor by his modesty, either during the lecture, or during the item shown later that night on BBC-tv's "Newsnight" programme. At no time was it claimed that he had actually invented the "space elevator" (as he insists on christening it, saying that sounds better than "space funicular", the name given it by Yuri Artsutenov, the Leningrad engineer who first thought of and described the idea); but we were left in little doubt as to who should now receive the praise for talking about it. The tone of the associated publicity material underlines this repeatedly. Those who did the real work get mentioned; Arthur C Clarke gets the fanfares.

Maybe that was a bit sour of me.

All right, Arthur Clarke is not a modest man. In this he is consistent, at least. Wally Gillings tells us in his series in the now-defunct Vision Of Tomorrow, that egotism was so much a trait of Clarke in his early days that for a while he used the pseudonym "E.G.O'brien". In a way, this is to Clarke's credit: he acknowledges his defect. But simultaneously he damns himself: despite this self-knowledge, he is half-hearted in ensuring that credit goes where it is due. And in the scientific community, the peer group which the OMNI lectures aspire to impress, this is a cardinal sin, for scientists advance largely through recognition of their efforts. Of course, this is true of many fields of human endeavour; but the need for recognition is particularly acute in the sciences, where knowledge is often hard-won and success comes despite great odds, if at all.

Of course, there are some who favour the "take care of Number One, because nobody else will" theory. If that is true of Arthur Clarke, he should at least give up this pretence of being a scientist. The ITV series founded upon his penchant for filing notes of strange happenings reveals him as being at his best in the rôle of "talking head". One cannot condemn a man for wishing to guarantee himself a comfortable old age; but it should not be at the expense of others.

Am I being too harsh? This question is rhetorical; no such doubts bother me. Clarke or his many champions are free to rebut those parts they disagree with. The violence of my reaction derives, I suppose, from disappointment: once there was a talented writer called Arthur C Clarke, whose novels I read avidly. They were wonderful excursions into worlds freed from the tyranny of what was "known to be true" and what was "practical": Clarke showed us that miracles could come true -- even if only in the future -- and were every bit as practical as the horse-drawn mundanities of contemporary life. His essays, too, were worth reading for their refreshing freedom from bigotry: PROFILES OF THE FUTURE should be a set book on scientific educational courses.

Therefore, though this commentary is not written to praise Caesar, neither have I any wish to bury him. As to whether I am playing the part of Anthony, or of Brutus, that is for you to decide.

Arthur C Clarke, the man I eventually met, was a different person. A surprise, as reality often is. It is so easy to confuse the work and the workman. Later, I learned to respect him anew for his ability to convey the dimensions of the wondrous which had first drawn me to his works. He has a remarkable talent for moistening dry technicalities and making them palatable. Throughout the talk at the Royal Institution, there was never any question but that the monstrous construct of which he spoke would actually be built, one day, though it cost a planet's ransom and would destroy our cozy attitudes towards space travel. It was also obvious, in a gut-felt way, that once its 36,000-kilometer-long strand stretched out into nothingness far above our heads, we would all benefit enormously by it.

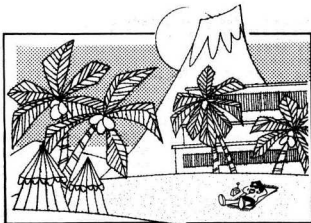
But it was also obvious that Clarke would not allow his audience to doubt that all of this would come to pass. His Question Time manner demonstrated this quite clearly: questions which explored the huge problems which such a project would bequeath to later generations and those which bore the burden of its construction were answered glibly. The scientific objectivity to which Dr Chris Evans subordinated most of his life appeared to have yielded to vested interests.

Clarke has talent. Properly used, it could enrich our lives through its influence on those mindless wardens of the public imagination, the "media". He knows how to put across his point of view. His speaking manner is polished and commands respect. He can be very personable. He has a fashionable track record (yes, I am referring to those wretched satellites -- like it or not, the man deserves a plus for having the nerve to write the Wireless World article which started some of it in the first place, back when they used to lock you up for less). The media find him easy to package for all those stodgy minds more at home with football results than space shuttles. But...

But this observer is still left thinking, "The pity of it..."

Could it be that the references to Yuri Artsutenov and Dr John Isaacs of the Scripps Institute, and the hints at all those other anonymous Stakhanovites of science whose collective thoughts have yielded the raw materials for several authors -- not just Clarke -- to shape their stories from, were accidentally muted? Would it were so.

Why did I bother to air these thoughts so publicly? Out of anger: because it hurts to see someone you admire letting himself down.



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STANDPOINT

CRITICISM

Helen McNabb

Below are some definitions of criticism:

1. The action of criticizing, or passing judgement upon the qualities or merits of anything; *esp.* the passing of unfavourable judgement; fault finding, censure.
2. The art of estimating the qualities and character of literary or artistic work; the function or work of a critic." (*Oxford English Dictionary*)

"A disinterested endeavour to learn and propagate the best that is known and thought in the world." (Matthew Arnold)

"We must grant the artist his subject his ideas, his *donne*: our criticism is applied only to what he makes of it." (Henry James)

"The critic, one would suppose, if he is to justify his existence, should endeavour to discipline his personal prejudices and cranks -- and compose his differences with as many of his fellows as possible, in the common pursuit of a true judgement." (T.S. Elliot)

"The lot of critics is to be remembered by what they have failed to understand." (George Moore)

"He admits there are two sides to every question -- his own and the wrong side." (Channing Pollock)

The consensus of opinion seems to be that criticism ought to be an honest attempt to assess a book -- what has it set out to do and does it do it successfully? That is basic, and it applies equally to an encyclopaedia or a cookery book, so that it is not sufficient for a novel. The use of 'standards' in assessing a work of fiction can be very helpful provided they do not create artificial restraints; in the same way, rules of perspective can be helpful to a painter, but non-compliance with perspective does not preclude a painting from being a work of art.

On the 'does it work' level the easiest standard to assess is the plot -- does it make sense? Are there any loose ends or bits straggling around? If it all fits together then the plot is satisfactory. It should also achieve an element of originality if the story is to rise above the mundane.

Accuracy is needed with factual information. Nothing is more irritating than an otherwise good story ruined by factual inaccuracies. That does not mean that the author has to limit himself to what is known and proven. Speculation is the life-blood of science fiction, and the 'willing suspension of disbelief' essential for fantasy is made without effort by most readers. But careless errors of information are not excusable.

Characterisation. Are they people or the now infamous 'cardboard cut-outs'? Are their motivations genuine, their reactions credible, their beliefs and hopes more than print on the page? Sometimes it is difficult to judge, and conflicting views may be irreconcilable. I cannot believe in D.H. Lawrence's characters; for me they are quite unreal, but the weight of critical and public opinion says I am wrong. Am I wrong, or are they, or none of us? Who is to say?

And what of literary merit? The use of language and the ability to write beyond the mere stringing together of words is what can combine all the other elements and transform them into a masterpiece or a disaster. Some SF is hardly literate, let alone literary -- Doc Smith, for instance. He is fun, like a comic book without the pictures, but his only other claim is that he was early, and many now famous SF

writers read him when young and retained an affection for him. There are *few great* writers in any field who are read because of their use of language rather than their subject -- Ursula LeGuin is the only SF writer I can immediately think of who transcends barriers. Below, there is a lesser literary merit which is greater than mere competence, and it is this which ought to be achieved.

All the above apply to any work of fiction, so what, if anything other than the label, distinguishes SF? It comes back to that other ephemeral notion -- ideas. 'SF is the literature of ideas.' Fine. All literature has ideas of *some* kind, but the majority of them are earthbound. The problem of definition is that SF has outgrown the science fiction label. It is no longer only science fiction -- it is space, speculative, sociological, and a multitude of other things. One cannot define something so nebulous, although people try. It is a fiction which goes beyond the known environment. It does not take place in the world exactly as we know it now. Something, or many things, are different, and the differences must be relevant to the story. The dividing line between mainstream and SF is at best a dotted one. Anthony Burgess and Nevil Shute both wrote SF books; much of Harlan Ellison and Tom Disch is SF only by label, the content of their stories often is not. Divisions are often arbitrary and sometimes misleading.

There is nothing I can see 'different' enough about SF to merit a whole new critical technique. The standards of any work of fiction are applicable; the best of SF, like LeGuin and Aldiss, has gained recognition in the big outside world. If the rest does not, part of the reason may be lack of merit.

The problem with SF criticism lies less in the standards of criticism than in the critics themselves. The reviews published tend to be intensely personal and the interests and prejudices of the reviewer become of paramount importance. It is necessary to interpret the review in the light of one's knowledge of the reviewer's own quirks in order to assess one's own reaction to the book. To know, for example, that Reviewer A hates Author B even though Reader C likes him; that Reviewer D is a rampant feminist and interprets everything *only* from a feminist's point of view; that Reviewer E is anti-religious; and so on. In small, private circulation magazines this is possible, and sometimes entertaining, but it is not criticism.

To write a valid criticism of a book it is vital that one is not personally involved; one must be dispassionate about it in order to assess it. If one has an intense personal view on the author or the subject it is only fair to say so and warn the reader of possible bias in the treatment of the book. For all the distrust of 'academic' criticism, what one needs for a fair criticism are the techniques learnt by any student of literature, aided by sensitivity and thought. Much of the academic criticism is not criticism either; it is riding a hobby horse in public, using and interpreting literature to support an established thought.

All the elements of a book are important. A book can have poor characterisation, or a poor plot, or less than glowing use of language, and still be worth reading. If it has all of these it is probably a bad book; if none it may be a work of art. It is the job of the critic to survey and assess the component parts of a book and indicate what standard the whole reaches -- and to attempt to do so without being unduly swayed by self. An impossible task, perhaps, and certainly one which very few SF critics seem willing to attempt.

THE FLIGHT FROM THE HEART OF BEING John Welsh

In his essay, *The Embarrassments of Science Fiction*, Thomas M. Disch suggested that SF is "a branch of children's literature" -- a theory which he later admitted had the chief merit of being a small annoyance to various people he didn't like, and one from which something essential remained lacking.

I think I know *why* something remained missing, and it's going to sound absurd: I think Disch over-estimated the maturity of SF. And I'm going to suggest something

here -- something which I hope won't be dismissed out of hand, because I believe it contains at least an element of truth. I would like to suggest that SF, or at least ideas-SF, is a manifestly schizoid literature, and, since the root causes of the schizoid condition lie in earliest infancy, that, in that sense, it's an infantile literature. This is a theory which would tend to explain the intellectual, emotional and moral limitations of SF (which Disch sees as being those of children's literature) as being characteristically those of schizoid literature.

The one thing which Disch confesses his theory doesn't explain is "why SF is read by so many adults". The schizoid diagnosis, on the other hand, would suggest that science fiction would appeal to the schizoid elements in all of us, and perhaps even that it would appeal especially to a predominantly schizoid readership.

I've come to believe, therefore, that one very valuable critical approach to SF -- and to literature, and to culture at large -- would be that which used insights from the recent developments in psychoanalysis known as 'object-relations psychology'. This is essentially a psychology of the schizoid process, one developed by the deeply intuitive analysts Melanie Klein, W.R.D. Fairbairn and D.W. Winnicott. For the genuinely interested, a superb exploration of their theories and of their implications for culture can be found in David Holbrook's marvellous *Human Hope and the Death Instinct*.

For the moment, however, you'll have to make do with the brief explanation that object-relations psychology is a (non-Freudian) theory which attempts to obtain insights into schizoid problems of meaning and identity by tracing their origins to a failure of the maturational processes at what's called the 'paranoid-schizoid' stage in the early mother-infant relationship -- a relationship which the above analysts believe to be of fundamental importance in the development of human identity.

A schizoid individual is someone who, because of insufficiently good mothering at this crucial stage in earliest infancy, has come to believe that *love is destructive*, and who therefore tends to promote false solutions to the problems of existence which are based on hate rather than on love and reparation. He "flies from the heart of being", as Holbrook puts it, and so denies the 'female element' of feeling, of sensitivity in himself. This is especially clear in the work of Robert Silverberg, I think, which I'll return to later. In flying from the heart of being (i.e. from all the feminine qualities in himself), the schizoid individual is likely to engage in what is known as 'false-male activity' in a desperate attempt to feel real. This means he is likely to over-emphasise the masculine qualities in himself, and that he is likely to engage in a "...meaningless succession of mere activities...performed ...in a futile effort to keep (himself) in being; to manufacture a sense of 'being' (he) does not possess. This may become a mania of obsessional compulsive activity, for the 'mind' cannot stop, relax or rest because of a secret fear of collapsing into non-existence." (Fairbairn) Surely this allows us to see the phenomenal output of writers like Asimov and Silverberg in a new light? Indeed, the latter once described himself as being like a 'berserk robot' at one time, a telling phrase if ever there was one.

Associated with this 'false-male activity' is the characteristic schizoid feature of *intellectualisation*. Since the schizoid individual "tends increasingly to substitute intellectual solutions of his emotional problems for attempts to achieve a practical solution to them within the emotional sphere of his relationships", he is led to an overvaluation of the thought processes, the consequences of which are: "(i) the thought processes become highly libidised; and the world of thought becomes the predominant sphere of creative activity and self expression, (ii) ideas tend to become substituted for feelings and intellectual values for emotional values." (Fairbairn)

Is not SF the literature *par excellence* in which "ideas tend to become substituted for feelings and intellectual values for emotional values"?

The first of the above two points is expressed in a slightly different way by David Holbrook in *Human Hope and the Death Instinct*: "Schizoid individuals are more often

inclined to construct intellectual systems of an elaborate kind than to develop emotional relationships with others on a human basis. There is a further tendency... 'to make libidinal objects of the systems they have created.'" In this case 'libidinal' obviously doesn't mean 'sexual'; it means the individual's entire life-energy may be intimately bound up with these intellectual systems. Isn't this evidently true to some extent of the relationship which writers such as Ian Watson, Isaac Asimov, Frank Herbert and Larry Niven have to their work? Indeed, this observation might well explain why some science fiction fans have become so deeply attached to things like Scientology, dianetics and the Dean drive.

"Intellectual pursuits as such," writes Fairbairn, "whether literary, artistic, scientific or otherwise, appear to exercise a special attraction for individuals possessing schizoid characteristics to one degree or another." In particular, though: "schizoid intellectuals are bound to be attracted to science as an escape from the pressure of personal emotional relationships which the schizoid person finds difficult." Surely, then, it isn't too absurd to suggest that schizoid writers (and readers) are bound to be attracted to *science-fiction*?

I think not. In fact, I think this 'schizoid diagnosis' can lead us to many valuable, penetrating and original insights into science fiction. I believe, for example, it can let us see that some of the essential value of writers like LeGuin, Sturgeon, Ellison and Dick lies in their deeply intuitive insights into problems of illusion, reality, identity, relationship, violence, etc, insights which spring from the profoundly important, creative 'female element' of 'being' in them. It can let us see that these are writers who often involve us in solutions to these problems of existence which are based on love and reparation rather than on hate. And it can also let us see that writers such as Silverberg, Heinlein, Farmer, van Vogt and so on (whose work is so deficient in creative symbolism) equally often attempt to involve us in 'hate-solutions' which deny the 'female element' of 'being' in us, and encourage the 'taboo on weakness'. Silverberg, who is a classic example of a schizoid writer in the science fiction field, is, I think, especially guilty of this. This is a writer whose grasp of emotional reality is so thin and whose feeling for experience is so anti-human and full of hate that the amount of praise lavished on him would be astonishing if I hadn't already suggested that he is appealing to a predominantly schizoid readership. Nevertheless, the very elements in Silverberg's work which show him to be a schizoid writer (e.g. the depersonalised sex; the manic denial of death, which is often intimately bound up with a schizoid wish to die and be re-born; the fear of mental collapse and disintegration) also show him to be wrestling with deep intra-psychic conflicts, and this deserves only our compassion, not our scorn.

So, to call the work of Silverberg, Heinlein, Farmer and so on *schizoid* is not to denigrate these writers as people; it is simply to point out that the solutions they offer to the problems of existence are false solutions, based on hate and on a schizoid reversal of human values.

If this 'schizoid diagnosis' is correct, and I believe it is, then a critical approach which uses interpretations from object-relations psychology would, I think, add a valuable new dimension to our understanding of science fiction. It would let us see why, in this genre more than any other, there is such a flight from the heart of 'being', which is a flight from recognition of our own vulnerability and mortality -- in essence, a flight from what it is to be human.

TIME AND AGAIN AND AGAIN...

Paul Baxter

The sequel has become an SF tradition and from the recent crop of novels it is apparent that the tradition shows no sign of dying -- e.g. Pohl's *Beyond the Blue Event Horizon* and Niven's *Ringworld Engineers*. Now, this is fine from the point of view of the author and the publisher, since if the original novel was successful good sales of the sequel are guaranteed, but it seems to me that the reader comes off less well. The track record of sequels is hardly stunning.

What are the reasons for this? Well, I believe that there are a number, some that apply to the sequel in general and some that apply more specifically to SF. Obvi-

sly in most cases the sequel will follow a well received novel, so it might be expected that some sequels would not match up to the original. However, this alone cannot account for the overwhelming failure of sequels to achieve the same standard as the first novel.

A major factor is probably laziness on the part of the author -- it is all too easy to repeat the format of the original in the hope that what has worked once will work again. Too often no attempt is made to extend the characterisation; instead the characters from the first work become increasingly stereotyped and two-dimensional. Here lies one of the basic problems: both reading and writing, if they are to be more than a 'throwaway' experience, necessarily require some effort, but the sequel presents a known background or known characters, and usually both. Neither reader nor writer is extended. The consequence of this is boredom on all sides, since almost inevitably the writer loses interest in the work and this is communicated rapidly to the reader. It can apply to all sequels, whether they be SF, western or mainstream. There is, however, a problem that applies to SF more than most other areas of literature; SF, as the old cliché puts it, is the literature of ideas. Originality, whether it be of background, characters or style, is of the essence in a good SF novel. The nature of SF is to move forward and map uncharted ground, not to become static -- as is almost inevitably the case with sequels.

The results of this are clearly seen in Philip Jose Farmer's "Riverworld" series. In the first novel, *To Your Scattered Bodies Go*, Farmer introduces the intriguing situation of a world where all the people who have ever lived on Earth have been resurrected. The author interweaves a standard adventure story of the explorer-Burton's attempts to discover the creators of Riverworld with an exploration of how well-known figures from history might act when confronted with each other. It is the way he uses this second idea that leads to the originality of the novel and to its success. The second and third novels in the series, *The Fabulous Riverboat* and *The Dark Design*, are in contrast very disappointing. It becomes obvious that Farmer is losing interest in the series, as the storyline becomes increasingly predictable and the energy disappears from his writing. But perhaps more importantly, the originality in the first novel -- the confrontations of famous people in strange situations -- degenerates into overplayed novelty. This may seem harsh criticism, since Farmer has created literally a cast of millions, but this cannot compensate for the fact that the series limits itself to the ideas used in the first novel. Quite simply, there is no progression.

I have not read the concluding novel of the series, *The Magic Labyrinth*, but I do not believe that it can possibly succeed. It is not a question of whether Farmer can regain interest in the series; the problem he faces is much greater than that. The novel by its very position in the series can be little more than a reworking of an idea that he has fully explored by the end of *To Your Scattered Bodies Go*. This illustrates the basic difficulty of sequel and series writing, which does not only apply to the "Riverworld" series -- I could equally well have chosen McCaffrey's "Dragonriders of Pern" series, Zelazny's "Amber" novels, or any of many others. In each case the writer becomes trapped by the world he or she has created, making originality impossible and stagnation the only result. There are few cases, indeed, where an SF author has managed to use a sequel to move beyond the level of simple repetition.

Unfortunately, the effect of the sequel extends beyond its own covers. By placing what might be a good novel in the context of a poor series the original is devalued; what seemed like a brilliant piece of plotting or characterisation in the first novel can become just some minor event in the sprawling whole. I know nothing worse than finding that, as Pohl has done recently with *Gateway*, a sequel has been written to one of my favourite books. If only authors would let a good novel stand on its own!

Whatever anyone says or writes, I am sure that as long as people continue to buy sequels and series (and I confess that I sometimes do, although I'm trying to give them up) they will be written and published. But if anybody reading this ever gets to the stage where they're contemplating writing a sequel, please think again. Why not try something original, because after all, that's what it's all about. ●

BOOK REVIEWS

BOOK REVIEWS

Reviews Editor: Joseph Nicholas

We are taking the unusual step of opening the book reviews this time with two reviews of one book. When you read them you will see why...

Rudy Rucker -- *WHITE LIGHT* (Virgin Books, 128pp, £1.95)

Reviewed (first) by Ian Watson

Rudy Rucker, like the hero of *White Light*, is a man of more than one part: a professional mathematician specialising in infinity and hyperspaces, a Rock enthusiast, an ex-underground cartoonist. He is also one thirty-second part of the philosopher Hegel (if my arithmetic holds up), being Hegel's great-great-great-grandson. And he is a completely crazy writer, in the best surrealist sense of the word. He is Kafka and Sheckley, Vonnegut and Lewis Carroll all rolled into one hyperwriter.

His first novel, *Spacetime Donuts*, was serialised in *Unearth* (though I don't know if they finished serialising it). *White Light* is his second novel, written while on a year's stay at the Mathematical Institute, University of Heidelberg.

Felix Rayman, its quite unheroic but persistent hero, is teaching freshman maths at a third-rate college in upstate New York when his habit of sleeping on his office floor, daydreaming about mathematical infinities, propels him into his astral body. But his is no lame-brained spiritualist trip. He wants to solve Cantor's Continuum Problem (which concerns hierarchies of infinity in set theory -- all explained very lucidly and painlessly, and it is *fascinating*). After a brush with the Devil and Jesus in a graveyard, he is charged to deliver a local ghostess to the Ultimate, the White Light, and being a dab hand at infinities he accelerates his astral form relativistically through the universe (making other out-of-the-body trips seem pretty limited) and arrives at an infinite resort hotel in the infinite land of Cimbri (a very unique mathematical Heaven). Getting a room, for instance, is a problem, since there is an infinite number of rooms but also an infinite number of guests, amongst whom are the ghosts of Einstein, Cantor and other infinity specialists... Teaming up with a dead alien beetle, he sets out to scale Mount On, an infinite mountain which embodies transfinite numbers.

However, there is nothing abstract about this story which ranges from being trapped in a Donald Duck cartoon strip, through encounters with alien carrot-ghosts eating rabbit stew, an inflatable seductress, a vast dump where all the dead TV sets, dead bottles of whisky and other things we loved but tossed away materialise, and a hijacking by talkative cars, to an actual perception of the God of Spinoza. The story is as chewy as a hamburger, and as stingy as a shot of booze. It's also very funny, and very touching; and it actually makes infinity tangible, something you can set foot on and manipulate. What's more, where other SF/fantasy writers might pull some nonsense of undiscovered physics out of the hat to 'explain' ghosts or astral trips, Rucker is using the mathematical logic which is basic to our thinking about the actual universe.

Felix returns from his trip (having won some, lost some) on Halloween. But no, unlike Orson Welles' disclaimer to already panicking listeners to *The War of the Worlds*, this isn't just explained by Halloween or a dream or an acid trip. Felix, back in the ordinary world with his higher dimensional perception all in tune, manufactures verifiable hypermatter spheres which hang in the air, ignoring gravity, and which can

be infinitely divided into copies of themselves (for which, of course, there is a mathematical rationale). Of course, the Government diddles him.

White Light is a marvellously inventive and lunatically logical story, where not only is the scaling of infinity a mad, convincing adventure, but where ordinary human happiness matters too, movingly. It is written with an enviable sprightliness.

Here is the Hitch-Hiker's Guide to Heaven, and Mt. Infinity. Don't miss it.

Only 128 pages? Well, those pages have quite a lot of (legible) words on them -- though not *quite* so many as in the aleph-null lines per page (each 49/50 as high as the one above, so that there's always room for 50 more lines) which Felix has to type out in the Library up there.

Reviewed (second) by Paul Kincaid

One of the most important jobs a publisher has to do is give the reader something he can read. With their first venture onto the publishing scene Virgin do not do a particularly good job of it. The print is small, cramped, headache-inducing and on some pages blurred.

Which is appropriate, since the novel is small, cramped, blurred and headache-inducing.

The author has clearly set out to write a campus cult novel, stringing together all sorts of odds and ends so that everybody might find some fragment that appeals to him. There are echoes of all sorts of authors from Denis Wheatley to Jorge Luis Borges and god knows how many between. None of these echoes, of course, show anything like the ability of the original. What holds them together is an odyssey to death and back that should be mind-bending -- in fact Rucker has his hero describe it as 'the makings for one killer of a surrealist novel', but unfortunately it is nothing of the sort.

A young maths lecturer at a small college in New York State starts having out of the body experiences. He meets Christ, the devil, and the ghost of a newly dead woman. With the woman he starts out for Cimón, which is, apparently, both heaven and hell plus an awful lot in between. The majority of the novel is then spent flitting about all over Cimón, but without managing to imbue the place with any semblance of reality.

At its best, when this transgalactic afterworld takes on the aspect of a city slum, it is at least possible to get some sort of visual image of what he is trying to describe. At its worst, as, for instance, when he takes us up an infinite mountain with shifting gravity, it is the unsteady cardboard backdrop for an unconvincing play. Mostly it is just a place Rucker invented to allow him to play his games with infinity. C and aleph-null and aleph-one and the other higher mathematical variations on infinity crop up with mind-numbing regularity, yet he never comes anywhere near explaining the difference between them.

Furthermore, as too many hack SF writers have discovered to their cost, merely to talk about mind-boggling concepts is not necessarily to convey their wonder. For all he manages to convey of what infinity is, Rucker could as well have been talking about 1 and 2.

Several people I know have tried to read *White Light*. It is a short book, but all gave up before the end. As a reviewer I persevered right to the last page. I honestly don't know why I bothered, there is nothing in the book to justify the effort.

One final criticism: £1.95 for a book of only 128 pages is extortionate. But it has one virtue -- the prohibitive cost may save a lot of people from the misfortune of reading the wretched thing.

The echoing of the lesser explosion left the commandos effete. The oubliette was surely nothing but a wreckage of worthless museum exhibits.

Byron Priess & J. Michael Reeves — *DRAGONWORLD* (Corgi/Bantam, 547pp, large format, £3.95)

The Brothers Hildebrandt & Jerry Nichols — *USHURAK* (Corgi/Bantam, 406pp, large format, £3.50)

Reviewed by Rob Hansen

I am up to my *ass*, friends, in fuzzy-footed, pointy-eared little creatures. I don't want to see no more of them. I don't give a fuck about them. I would like to see a human being... who has a problem I can identify with, instead of the search for the power gems and the lost realm of Nyarlathotep or whatever. Jesus God! Mindless garbage!
(Harlan Ellison, *Rocket Blast Comic Collector*, August 1980)

As recession relentlessly tightens its grip on the western world and increasing international tensions have raised the spectre of global war we appear to have decided that the literature of the age, the type of story most suited to our needs in these troubled times, is the fairy tale. Stories of elves, dwarves, dragons and similar cute creatures are appearing in profusion, feeding on each other, getting weaker and weaker as the textured richness of Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* is diluted in book after book into an ever-thinning gruel of unimaginative and inoffensive pap guaranteed not to unsettle the weak-minded. To further ensure that the dullards who read such feeble fodder will not hurt their heads by actually having to think about it, using their own imaginations to form mental images of the scenes described therein, such books also provide the images for them in the shape of "fantastic illustration".

The bewildering success of Anne McCaffrey's "Dragon" series has pointed to the big bucks that may be reaped from such books, and the money motive itself can surely be no better demonstrated than by the recent *Dragon Lensman*, a title some bright publisher doubtless thinks of as a double winner sure to bring in the bread. As you might possibly have twigged by now, the above quote from Harlan Ellison sums up my feelings to a tee — and, having stated my position, I shall now proceed to appraise *Dragonworld*, 'an epic fantasy by Byron Priess and J. Michael Reeves, illustrated by Joseph Zucker'.

According to the biographical blurb at the end of the book, Zucker 'created many of the major characters and set illustrations of the Ralph Bakshi film *The Lord of the Rings*', and to be fair the book's artwork isn't bad. I may not like the subject matter but I can and do appreciate the technique displayed here. The artwork is reproduced from pencil originals and, as anyone who has tried both media will tell you, it's far easier to obtain subtle effects in pencil than in ink, but even so the mood-setting shading is still very effective, unobtrusive yet evocative. Given the stilted and stylised prose in which these tales are invariably written, it's hardly surprising that the art has followed suit because, for all its technical quality, it is stylistically clichéd: the figures, the scenery and the situations look as if they could have been culled from almost any children's picture book published in the last thirty years. In my own cynical way I can't help but wonder if this isn't entirely inappropriate, if, in fact, they don't know their audience far better than I. If so, then perhaps the cynicism is entirely theirs.

As a footnote to all this, Byron Priess is the publisher responsible for *The Illustrated Harlan Ellison* and Samuel Delany's and Howard Chaykin's *Empire*, which, while not perfect, were laudable attempts at graphic science fiction. What a pity he wasn't content with just publishing.

And so to *Usharak*, 'created by the Brothers Hildebrandt and Jerry Nichols... as both a book and a film'. If a film is indeed ever made of this tome, one can only hope that the characters in it have more movement than those in the Hildebrandts' illustrations, where even a scene meant to depict violent action looks like a study in still life. These illustrations take the form of both straightforward pen-and-ink renditions inserted into the narrative and paintings lavishly reproduced on glossy plates bound into the structure of the book at presumably appropriate places. While

the drawings show a reasonable degree of draughting skill, though little imagination, the colour plates are entirely unappealing, their garishness emphasising the paucity of thought behind their conception and reminding me of nothing so much as the colour plates one often finds in children's bibles. Imagine any one of a thousand such pictures of the nativity that you must have come across and you have a good idea of the style and tone of a painting by the Brothers Hildebrandt.

Originality is almost totally lacking from their work as displayed here, so once you learn that the story outline and the visual input was supplied by them it should come as no surprise to learn also that the text displays the same lack of originality. In fact, the text is worse because whereas the Brothers Hildebrandt are at least craftsmen with the ability to paint an acceptable picture, Jerry Nichols is neither an artist nor a craftsman: his prose functions on only the most basic of levels.

Before leaving *Ushurak*, I must comment on its cover, which seems to me to epitomise more than anything how this work must have been conceived as a commercial product rather than a work of art. As you're probably aware, the Brothers Hildebrandt painted the American poster for *Star Wars*, which subsequently became the best-selling poster in history, appearing on T-shirts, towels, mugs, sheets, the works -- a *big deal* and a very identifiable image. It obviously makes good commercial sense to capitalise on this as much as possible, and this is precisely what they have done. Put the cover next to the poster and the parallels are obvious, the positions and stances of the central male and female characters mirroring those of Luke and Leia -- even the male character's white tunic and trousers are strongly reminiscent of Luke's. If the cover intended as the poster for any

cover is ever intended as the poster for any film version of the book, then the cries of "Rip off!" will be justified.

But SF and fantasy cover art, which accounts for about 90% of all such art, is a purely functional artform, packaging designed to catch your eye and tempt you into buying the book. However much I or anyone else may say about these gaudy and garish images, though, it will never raise them to the status of true art. SF art is a ghetto artform, amusing and interesting, but while Achilles, Frazetta, Whelan and their ilk may be fine draughtsmen and illustrators, for the work of fine artists you must look not to the covers of SF books but to the walls of art galleries. Visit those galleries and you will return enriched with a standard against which SF art may be measured and put into its proper perspective; to defend it as anything more is simply misplaced pride.

Nancy Springer -- *THE SILVER SUN* (Pocket Books, 292pp, \$2.50)

Reviewed by Mary Gentle

'A mythic tale of splendour and adventure' it says on the cover; a pity it isn't true. It also says 'the prophecy of *The White Hart* fulfilled', which is open to doubt. Springer's *The White Hart* was a competent though unspectacular fantasy: the world of the Isle had a jewel-like quality; the main character, Bevan, was out of the ordinary, and came to an unusual (though not original) end. Some uncertainty with the characterisation of women, and copious borrowing from the Welsh, Irish and Tolkienian mythologies could be put down to inexperience. The book walked a narrow line but, to my mind, it came off.

The Silver Sun doesn't; it is a bad book. The mythology isn't so much borrowed as transplanted verbatim, in great chunks. Tolkien's elves are present, under bare aliases, and there is a third-rate village hall production of the ending of his Third Age. The style is self-conscious, semi-archaic and very contrived. Obvious anachronisms -- in this type of fantasy sub-creation -- include gypsies and winged horses. Springer's assumptions, whether conscious or unconscious, are worrying: it is a world where kings rule by divine right, peasants are for patronising or slaughtering, atheists are hung, and women revered (but on no account allowed to participate in the serious business of living). There is much Hollywood Robin-Hoodery, and unconvincing and embarrassing male camaraderie. I take the underlying homosexuality

to be unconscious, though it's very easy to read the story as a prolonged courtship between Hal and Alan, the two protagonists. In the end both Boys' Own heroes marry -- respectively, a Rapunzel-like princess and a take-off Arwen Evenstar. It says something for Springer's characterisation that her horses are more clearly defined than her women. The opus is not helped by the interjection of puerile verse, either. Yet it has the seeds of a good book: Hal's manoeuvring to take over from, rather than kill, his father (who turns out not to be his father, rather spoiling the point), and the idea of the Sunrise and Sunset Kings ruling together.

So why is this a bad book? Herewith some unfounded suspicion... On the cover, in small type, it says 'based on her earlier novel, *The Book of Suns*' -- so what we have here is not really the second volume in (yet another) fantasy trilogy, despite its being listed as such. What we have here is an earlier and much worse novel, slightly rewritten to pass as part of the Isle mythology, thus simultaneously jumping on a bandwagon and blighting a reputation. It's a pity the author was unable to resist the temptation. The third volume, given as *The Sable Moon*, may on this basis prove a better book, but that doesn't excuse the production of this particular literary horse dropping.

Joan D. Vinge -- THE SNOW QUEEN (Sidgwick & Jackson, 536pp, £6.95)

Reviewed by Chris Morgan

It is impossible to take this novel seriously; it is high romance, quite closely based on the Hans Andersen fairy tale of the same title. The setting is an almost fairy-tale background where most people neither comprehend nor make use of technology, although a few possess such magical gadgets as interstellar spaceships and stunner handguns, and know the secrets of immortality and human cloning. This is a seductive type of setting -- glamorous and likeable but far from being realistic or in any way believable. One looks in vain for another level which one can take seriously -- allegory, myth, philosophical principle, some form of analogy with aspects of our own world -- and in its absence one has to conclude that *The Snow Queen* is solely a work of entertainment, and a fairly shallow one, at that.

Whether this matters very much depends upon one's expectations. Anyone who reads through the novel without pause for thought, allowing themselves to be swept along by events and emotions, will almost certainly derive great enjoyment from it. All the 'best-seller' ingredients are present: royalty, palaces, beautiful clothes, long cloaks; simple fisher-folk, loveable sea-creatures, an assortment of criminals; heroes and heroines, villains of both sexes; sex; love, hate, humiliation, power-lust; a wonderful mental talent which can be explained away scientifically; misunderstandings and revelations; an ending in which just deserts are received by all. The presentation is extremely slick and readable (some passages are remarkably impressive, good by any standards) so that the five hundred pages slip by as if they were half that number.

It is a critic's task, though, to look past a novel's facade -- however flashy that may be -- and to check its foundations for holes, cracks and other signs of instability. And it is when one examines the fine detail and underlying assumptions of *The Snow Queen* that its imperfections show up.

Arienrhod, the snow queen, is the absolute monarch of the planet Tiamat. She has ash-blonde hair and appears to be about twenty years old, though she has reigned for 150 years, kept young by a blood-extract from the mers (a helpful and inoffensive species of sea-creature, slaughtered for its life-giving blood; the eventual 'revelation' of the mers' sentience comes as no surprise at all). But Arienrhod's reign must shortly end because she is a Winter, one of the more technologically-oriented segment of Tiamat's population, which is at present in the ascendancy. Soon Tiamat's second sun (the 'Summer Star') will approach the planet, interfering with its black-hole transit facility to and from other settled worlds, and causing the more primitive and technologically incompetent Summers to take over for the next 150 years or so -- a tradition which has persisted for many centuries. (The people of the planet Khare-mough seem to have an even greater talent for all things technological: "I'm a

Kharemourghi. I can repair any piece of equipment made, blindfolded.") While it is an interesting demonstration of Joan Vinge's faith in the discarded Lamarckian theory of evolution, this situation is so baldly stated that only the least critical of readers will be convinced by it. (The Summers, Winters and Kharemourghi are all fully human, by the way.) That there should exist an interplanetary law which forbids the giving of sophisticated technological expertise to the people of Tiamat and particularly to the Summers (a sort of *Hard To Be A God* ordinance) is all the more difficult to believe, because there is nothing to prevent Summers from going to Tiamat's capital city of Carbuncle, where magical off-world technology abounds, and there is little to prevent the Winters from hoarding Kharemourghi technology.

The tradition by which Arienrhod must, at the end of the long winter, be forced into the sea to drown, making way for the choosing of a new queen from amongst the Summers, is credible only as a plot convenience -- a crisis point which she must try to avoid. Her first ruse -- to have a clone of herself brought up as a Summer -- seems remarkably pointless, though it does give rise to Moon, a twenty-year-old look-alike of the queen, and the book's central character. But while Arienrhod is a wholly unpleasant character (so cold and bitchy and unpopular that one wonders how she has managed to retain power for so long), Moon is equally unconvincing for being too insipid and goody-goody.

The only factor which makes Moon interesting is that she becomes a sibyl: she joins an interstellar, faster-than-light information system which appears to work almost entirely by organic means. Any sibyl who is asked for specific information goes into a trance and provides it -- fully correct and up-to-date. This is, of course, another example of sufficiently advanced science being indistinguishable from magic, but it is a though-provoking element which is never fully exploited. (It is also an information *preservation* system which is a hangover from a former empire -- shades of Asimov's *Foundation*.)

Upon realising her talent for being a sibyl, Moon becomes alienated from her cousin and fiancé, Sparks, who is so annoyed by his own inability to become a sibyl that he goes off to Carbuncle and falls under the spell of the snow queen, eventually becoming her masked consort. Sparks is a believable character only if his behaviour is related to that of Kay -- his counterpart in the fairy tale, who is struck in the heart and eye by splinters from the magic mirror which makes everything good appear ugly, causing his personality to become cruel and mean. Even if one accepts that Arienrhod's influence over Sparks acts like a splinter of magic mirror, his sudden repentance close to the end of the novel still fails to ring true.

If these three major characters are something of a disappointment (perhaps because they are constrained by the original fairy tale) there are more than enough splendid minor characters to redress the balance. Among the most notable are Jerusha Pala-Thion, a female police inspector; BZ, a police sergeant who is both the proud product and victim of the intricate caste system of his home planet of Kharemourgh; Fate Ravenglass, a near-blind mask-maker in Carbuncle, who is wise beyond her years and sees more than most; a deliberately mysterious figure whose fairy tale counterpart is a talking raven; and Herne, the rough, tough soldier of fortune whom Sparks replaces as Arienrhod's consort.

It should be clear by now that *The Snow Queen* is a broad novel, following the fortunes of several characters over several years. Many facets of life on Tiamat and Kharemourgh are described (not always believably: the political system on Tiamat is far too precarious to have survived intact for 150 years or more). But the variety of backgrounds allows no time for reader boredom, even if one does gain the impression that some plot twists have occurred just so that Joan Vinge could show off yet another aspect of her future civilisation. The scenes on Kharemourgh fall into this category: Moon is taken there on a spaceship almost by accident on a round trip which lasts (subjectively) only a couple of months but which (due to relativistic effects) occupies five years of Tiamat's time. But the Kharemourgh society is one of Ms Vinge's better creations and is well worth visiting. It is worth noting that this long transit time must surely inhibit non-essential travel between stars, making it doubt-

ful whether any form of political hegemony could really exist among the settled worlds, and especially whether the chief minister of such a hegemony would risk being away for five years to attend the Winter-to-Summer changeover ceremonies on Tiamat.

For most of this novel the author is clearly manipulating her characters. While some degree of predestination seems correct, all their decisions and moves seem contrived to further the plot (which is itself pretty predictable for too much of the time), and everything is tied up far too neatly at the end.

On balance, *The Snow Queen* is a considerable achievement, its breadth making up for lack of depth. Its science fantasy ethos marks a return by Joan Vinge to the type of setting she used in 'Tin Soldier' and 'Mother and Child' -- her earliest stories, which first appeared in Damon Knight's *Orbit* anthologies -- and which has been occasionally distinguishable in later pieces such as 'The Crystal Ship' and her Hugo-winning 'Eyes of Amber'. It contrasts strongly with her more scientifically based work, such as 'Fireship' (which was surely intended as a satire on the typical *Analog* story) and the somewhat irritating *The Outcasts of Heaven Belt*, her first novel. Overall, this variation is a good thing, demonstrating that Joan Vinge is a writer of remarkable range, capable of becoming a major force in the field of science fiction.

John Shirley -- CITY COME A-WALKIN' (Dell, 204pp, \$1.95)

Reviewed by Mary Gentle

Although a novel, this book reads with the ease of a novella or short story. Shirley's style is unobtrusive, but not bland. There are no other titles mentioned either on the back cover or inside, so this may be a first novel; in which case its quality is all the more surprising.

City Come A-Walkin' has its antecedents in Leiber: *Night's Black Agents* (the first appearance of urban SF) and *Our Lady of Darkness*. Both the latter and this book involve San Francisco, but the two views of the city only rarely coincide. Shirley's story is set in the near future (I read it as the 1990s, though this isn't specified) with various minor changes on today -- cash has been replaced by computerised credit, punk rock succeeded by angst rock and computer-composed muzak. It's difficult to tell, cities being what they are, how much of what is on the streets here is future extrapolation and how much is present-day truth.

The story concerns Stu Cole, middle-aged owner of the club Anesthesia, Catz Wailen (formerly Sonja Pflug), psi-rocker, and City itself. The City does come walking, the gestalt mind of San Francisco's inhabitants embodies itself, becoming aware, walking urban streets, searching out Stu Cole, while itself being understood more deeply than it wants by Catz. Shirley goes one step further than Leiber: all cities have gestalt minds. We meet Sacramento, 'the apotheosis of whores', and hear of Chicago and Los Angeles, the latter 'diffuse, predatory...', all in their own conspiracy. But not against humanity, only against certain sections of it; and in a curiously altruistic way working towards their own dispersal -- which is logical when you remember, we are the city. The plot, involving the Mafia, is hazy in places; the ending comes in a landslide of events, and yet convinces.

The book's main strength is its characters. Stu and Catz live, breathe, exist beyond the printed page. There is violence, there is sex: one horrifies and one gladdens. The final confrontation between Stu and Catz has a gritty emotional reality; what is done is paid for. With its concern for music and gestalt mind, it bears a superficial resemblance to Spider and Jeanne Robinson's *Stardance*, though the flabby emotions and lack of responsibility in that are missing from Shirley's work.

If anything is unconvincing, it's the temporal paradox it involves -- a type of Dunne's infinite regress -- but it only forms a minor part of the book. The rest is worth paying money for.

I'VE JUST
BOUGHT A
COPY OF
'WARTWORLD
MERENARY'



IT'S THE
SEQUEL TO
'TORD PRINCESS
OF ALTAIR 5'



YOU BOUGHT IT?

YOU PAID
GENUINE
CASH FOR
THE THING?

AND
WHY NOT?



IT'S GREAT
ENTERTAINMENT



GREAT
ENTERTAINMENT
BE DAMNED,
IT'S GARBAGE

NO LITERARY MERIT
WHATSOEVER

LISTEN,
WHO'S TALKING
ABOUT
LITERARY
MERIT?



THIS IS
SCIENCE
FICTION



SO THAT'S GOOD
REASON FOR
PANDERING TO
THE TASTES OF
GADGET-FIXATED
HALFWITS?

YOU HAVE
TO BE
REALISTIC



REMEMBER WHAT
HEINLEIN AND
ANDERSON SAID:
'THE SF WRITER
IS COMPETING FOR
THE READER'S
BEER MONEY'



ALL RIGHT
ALL RIGHT
ALL RIGHT
GOD DAMN IT



YOU
FINALLY
WON ME
OVER



I'LL AGREE TO
BECOME AN
ALCOHOLIC

Langdon Jones -- THE EYE OF THE LENS (Savoy Books, 164 pp, £1.25)

Reviewed by Steve Higgins

Reading the book, it is not difficult to understand why, as Jones explains in his introduction, publishers have been reluctant to touch it. Nor is it any surprise, considering their eclectic and iconoclastic output, that it is Savoy of Manchester who have finally rectified the omission.

Only one of the stories could be described as instantly likeable, 'Symphony no. 6 in C Minor "The Tragic", by Ludwig van Beethoven II'.

Perhaps our musicians would ask why a composer of such talent has remained completely unknown. We can only surmise that his extremely unfortunate name has quite a lot to do with it.

From this understated beginning the piece continues in its recounting of the life and works of a composer who originally preferred law, and used to study at night by candlelight after his hated music lessons. But even in the midst of such hilarity we are in the presence of a writer of very dark vision. The black humour of Beethoven's overshadowed namesake finds its echoes in the black landscapes of 'The Garden of Delights', in which a man visiting his now derelict childhood home slips back in time to make love to his mother, all the while knowing it will be the only full moment of his otherwise empty life. Along similar lines 'The Time Machine' describes the final assignation of an adulterous affair through a slowly dislocating sense of time. 'The Great Clock', the only 'linear' story in the book, portrays a desparately mechanical existence, whilst the title story -- in fact three linked pieces -- is like a collage of madness, enigma and surrealism.

Even at his most conventional, Jones' aims are not those of more traditional writers. He is quite firmly in the *New Worlds* 'school', whose only common aim was to extend the possibilities of representing experience, and find more worthy areas of experience to explore. In his introduction he discusses the kind of non-sequential writing which he attempts, making clear that he never intended anything but 'experimental writing', whilst occasionally seeming to display a naive puzzlement that there could be any other way for a serious writer to approach his work.

On the other hand, none of the stories present immense problems of understanding, though they all require work to uncover their depths. 'The Great Clock' is laboriously sequential, 'Ludwig van Beethoven II' is a pseudo-article, and 'The Garden of Delights' employs an old trick of nesting flashbacks, with an ironic twist. 'The Time Machine' and 'The Eye of the Lens' only present difficulties if viewed in rigidly traditional terms: if approached as something like a collage, or a piece of music, and not made to yield up some kind of 'story', they can reveal a great deal.

Jones' work has a stark power, derived largely from the nature of his themes: sex, madness, and a bleak and isolated view of life and death. *The Eye of the Lens* ought to sell far better than it will, but any *Vector* reader with more than half a brain will go out now and do his bit to rectify that injustice.

Ursula LeGuin -- THRESHOLD (Gollancz, 183pp, £5.50)

Reviewed by Paul Kincaid

A youth on the verge of adulthood but trapped by an unhappy home life one day stumbles upon a private place where time runs at a different rate, enabling him to escape on his own for a while. There he meets a young girl of about his own age, Irene, similarly fleeing from an unhappy home life, who feels he has intruded upon her private refuge. Although the two are antagonistic, through her he is introduced to a small community in this parallel world -- one with a Ruritanian air, like a fairy tale version of Orsinia, whose dream-like quality is emphasised by its existing in perpetual twilight -- whose inhabitants are imprisoned by a fear that keeps them isolated from the rest of their world. The two outsiders alone are able to climb the

mountain, find and kill the source of this fear. On their return journey their antagonism turns to love, and they become able to cope with the real world.

Recounted so baldly, the story is trite in the extreme. Similar rite-of-passage fairy tales are so commonplace that no incident in the book comes as a surprise. And the symbolism is laid on with a trowel, one of LeGuin's abiding weaknesses that encourages the sort of pseudo-academic hagiography I have castigated before in these columns. What rescues the book, however, is her writing, which is, needless to say, superb. She has a particularly sharp eye for the modern world, and those passages set in the real world are far and away the most powerful and effective scenes in the book. The characters, also, are real, and a pleasant break from the stereotypes that usually parade through such books. Hugh, the hero, for example, is bullish, slow witted but not unintelligent, lacking in self-assurance and awkward in his relations with other people. His relationship with his self-centred and demanding mother is one of the novel's gems.

After LeGuin's masterly creation of Orsinia, in *Malafrena*, *Tembreabrezi* comes just a little too glibly from the pen, just a little too 'chocolate-boxy' -- but, once again, the characters who inhabit this romantic but unconvincing town have a breath of life about them. In particular, the stiff Master coming face-to-face with his fear, and the seemingly insignificant Lord Horn revealing his real worth, are fine portraits. I must confess, though, that the female dragon Hugh is able to kill with a single sword-stroke does not convince me as the source of the psychic fear that has paralysed *Tembreabrezi*, but this is perhaps one of those cases where symbolism has got the better of storytelling. The developing relationship between Hugh and Irene as they climb the mountain to this bloody encounter and then descend again after it is, however, one of the high points of the novel.

Though the publishers have not indicated this either way, *Threshold* is quite clearly a book aimed primarily at adolescents, and hence some of its weaknesses may be excused. Whether you excuse them or not, however, the strengths do outweigh them, and make the book well worth reading. After *Malafrena*, which I consider far and away LeGuin's best book to date, it is something of a potboiler -- but then, her potboilers do tend to be on the level of other authors' high artistic endeavour.

One final grumble: why do publishers occasionally find it necessary to change the title of a book for a British audience? *Threshold* is a pretty uninspired one, nothing like as appropriate as its American title, *The Beginning Place*. I can see no justification whatsoever for this change, and only hope that the eventual paperback publisher has the good sense to change it back.

Charles Sheffield -- *SIGHT OF PROTEUS* (Sidgwick & Jackson, 282pp, £6.50)

THE WEB BETWEEN THE WORLDS (Sidgwick & Jackson, 274pp, £6.95)

Reviewed by Chris Morgan

Charles Sheffield is the poor man's Larry Niven: his strength, the ability to write convincingly about future science, is less pronounced than Niven's, while his weakness, the inability to write English interestingly or with anything remotely resembling a decent style, is much worse than Niven's. British-born, now living in the USA, he manages to combine the worst of both English and American writing styles in his work, producing that dread mid-Atlantic result so beloved of disc-jockeys and other devotees of contemporary bad taste.

He has been unmistakably influenced by Niven; *Sight of Proteus*, his first novel, is an obvious sub-Niven concoction. Not only does Sheffield's protagonist, Bey Wolf, often act and sound like Niven's Beowulf Shaeffer, but the whole trendy, high-technology, 22nd Century ambience of *Sight of Proteus* reminds one of the worst of Niven. But while Niven has always striven for originality and has usually had the good sense to pare his stories and novels to the bone, excising unnecessary material in order to keep the plot moving, Sheffield writes at too great a length, seeming to delight in superfluous scenes and excessive detail.

The plot of the novel hinges on its only real piece of constructive originality: that, by means of a combination of technology and mental effort, human beings are able to alter their shapes -- a process which takes several days, depending upon the shape chosen. This may be done only to match certain approved, registered patterns, which range from such simple changes as a different shape to one's nose to far-reaching alterations which fit one for unprotected life in the vacuum of space. Bey Wolf and assistant work in the Office of Form Control, checking on illegal shapes and hunting down those who assume them. Unfortunately, the ramifications of this society have not been satisfactorily worked out, and the setting comes across as merely a slightly hyped-up version of 1980.

A lack of imagination, an inability to avoid SF clichés, and a writing style not much advanced beyond Hugo Gernsback's result in such passages as this:

"Take the toughest and seediest of the twentieth century urban ghettos. Age it for two hundred years, and season it with a random hodge-podge of over- and underground structures. Populate it with the poorest of the poor, and throw in for good measure the worst failures of the form-change experiments. You have Old City, where the law walked cautiously by day, and seldom by night. Bey Wolf and John Larsen, armed with cold lights, stun-guns and trace sensor, emerged from the long underground corridor just as first dusk was falling. They looked around them cautiously, then began to follow the steady arrow of the tracer, deeper into Old City." (p.69)

There have been, and will continue to be, worse first novels than Sights of Proteus, but that is meagre justification for inflicting it on the reading public.

Just to prove that practice makes, if not perfect, at least somewhat better, The Web Between The Worlds is less dire. It shares the same faults as Sight of Proteus but has the advantage of being the 'other space elevator novel'. Charles Sheffield and Arthur C. Clarke had the same idea at the same time -- for an immense tower connecting the Earth's surface with a space station in geostationary orbit -- and their novels dealing with it were both first published in the USA in 1979. Their solutions to the engineering problems involved are radically different, but too boringly technical for me to waste Vector's space in comparisons of them. (Those of you who are interested in the subject probably attended Clarke's Omni lecture in London in September anyway.) I suppose I must mention that at the end of The Web Between The Worlds, by way of an afterword, is a rather condescending letter from Clarke, pointing out that neither he nor Sheffield have plagiarised each other and that he objects to Sheffield's technical solution. The most noticeable similarity between the two is that the concept of the space elevator is insufficient a hook upon which to hang a novel: while Clarke padded out his with chunks of ancient history and some appallingly contrived scenes of pseudo-action, Sheffield resorts to flashbacks, revelations and poorly-motivated jealousies between his main characters.

The technological side of The Web Between The Worlds is interestingly innovative, though too many marvellous gadgets seem to have been inserted just as padding -- perhaps in the hope that the reader won't notice the perfunctory characterisation and all-too-obvious plot twists. Some of the climactic scenes are excitingly written, despite their predictability and the tedious explanations which follow, but there are not enough of them to save the book.

If SF were solely a literature of ideas, Charles Sheffield would be one of the hottest properties around. But it isn't, and until he learns to intersperse his technological creations with people he will remain a technical journalist rather than a novelist.

Their rocket functioned by means of a beam of photons projected fore and aft of the machine. The one serving to reduce pressure in an atmosphere from the nacelle of the craft, the latter to create a molecular pressure against elements in the tail of the craft by which method they were thrust forward much in the fashion of a jet.

Reviewed by Steve Higgins

Like Gregory Benford's previous novels (such as *The Stars Are Gods* and *In the Ocean of the Night*) *Timescape* is about scientific development in the near future, reworking old SF themes -- in this case time travel -- in the context of modern physics. 18 years from now scientists at Cambridge are attempting to broadcast signals by tachyon to inform previous generations of the causes of the eco-disaster which is about to drag the West under, and most of the rest of the world with it. 18 years ago, in 1962, scientists in California doing experiments on nuclear magnetic resonance are trying to tackle the annoying problem of spurious random noise.

Much material is glossed over -- such as the means of generation of the tachyon beam. However, *Timescape* is not a scientific text. It is more concerned with the scientists and other people involved in the two projects. In fact the book is billed as 'perhaps the most convincing portrayal of working scientists to be found in modern fiction.' As such it generally succeeds. The research departments are plagued with petty rivalries and departmental politics, mixed in with the mundane details of writing up lab books and checking equipment, and the occasional moments of intensity and excitement, the last of which fits in with the public impression of Ivory Towers of Pure Learning. The scientists are shown trying to reconcile their emotional lives with their passion for their work. Unfortunately, Benford's depiction of these emotional lives tends to derive more from Harold Robbins than from reality. Both main characters struggle to cope with the threat their intense concern with their work poses to their relationships with wife or girlfriend. But those relationships are rarely shown in any depth. Undoubtedly, asexual relationship is one of the central elements in almost any life, but life extends beyond that. Benford's view often seems remarkably limited, despite his worthy attempt to write a serious novel and paint as whole a picture of his characters as possible.

Equally annoying is Benford's tendency to melodrama in the action. The California sections are often no more than the old lone genius pitched against a short-sighted establishment. As the climax approaches the book manages to cause a degree of distancing through the excesses, whilst yet achieving a quite gripping tension. One reads the last chapters quite desperate to know what happens next, but never believing that it is anything more than a story.

The characters are at their worst when Benford is trying to characterise their Englishness. When phrases like 'Oh lor' cropped up on the second page I began to dread the next 410. Such things were thankfully rare, allowing memories of Enid Blyton to slink back into dark recesses where they could be once more ignored. On the other hand, being English, it is not always easy for me to tell when the characters are behaving 'Englishly'. I was halfway through before I realised that the pub scenes must have been a wow for Americans, as, no doubt, were the references (cut from this edition) to Prince 'Randy' Andy. But essentially his supposedly English characters are transatlantic types with cultural mores foisted on them, rather than genuine expressions of nationality.

I don't know why Benford writes the sort of SF he does. Although his stuff is certainly open to labelling as 'hard' it resembles the Larry Niven of this world only in limited respects; it is far more ambitious, and the science is less of a source of interest. After all, science is stranger than *sci-fi* and popular distillations of science (in fiction or not) lose all their real appeal. Which is not to say that scientific interest is absent. Those who enjoy Isaac Asimov's pop science should drool with glee over the potted versions of relativity, and the quantum mechanical treatment of time travel paradoxes was surprisingly interesting. Which is why, in the end, I felt Benford copped out by trundling up a stock formula instead of facing the imaginative challenge this presented.

Man is an indefinable creature. The ancient Greeks pondered over the amber glow that emanates from two materials in friction. Today we have the science of electronics.

ALSO RECEIVED...

reviewed by Joseph Nicholas

Terry Carr (Ed.) -- BEST SCIENCE FICTION OF THE YEAR 9 (Gollancz, 361 pp, £7.50)

By all accounts an even less memorable selection of stories than last year's, many of them chosen from such populist (and hence less imaginative) sources as *Omni* and *Isaac Asimov's*, with the exception of Philip K. Dick's "The Exit Door Leads In" from *Rolling Stone College Papers 1*. It does include George R.R. Martin's Hugo-winning novelette "Sandkings", but then what do awards mean these days?

John Brunner -- INTO THE SLAVE NEBULA (Millington, 176 pp, £5.95)

First UK edition of a 1958 (wrongly dated as 1968) space opera about a gang of interstellar slavers who auction off kidnapped, brainwashed, blue-dyed humans as android servants... Well, we knew Brunner wrote some pretty rosey stuff in his early days, but that hardly excuses its reissue now. What will those who haven't read *Stand on Zanzibar* or *The Shockwave Rider* think of his skills and reputation?

Alfred Bester -- GOLEM¹⁰⁰ (Sidgwick & Jackson, 384 pp, £6.95)

The illustrated novel pushed to its utmost limits: in this case the (chaotic and inept) illustrations are intended to not merely complement the text but to form part of it, supposedly demonstrating the disorientation the characters experience as they venture into the depths of their subconscious, but actually disorienting the reader to the point where he simply gives up in disgust. It's an unmitigated disaster, through and through.

Isaac Asimov, Martin Greenberg and Charles G. Waugh -- THE SCIENCE FICTION SOLAR SYSTEM (Sidgwick & Jackson, 317 pp, £6.95)

Reprint anthology of stories about the different planets of the solar system, at least according to Asimov's 'before' and 'after' notes to each one, telling us what we used to know and what we know now about said planets (and presumably being somewhat out of date about Saturn already). But most of the stories simply use the planets as backdrops, and in any case SF is a literature with a mythopoetic function, intended to dramatise abstract problems of being, not the kind of ploddingly factual system of prediction that Asimov and his co-editors seem to treat it as. Presumably the spirit of Gernsback and his aptly-named *Delusion* yet moves and breathes in American SF.

Terry Carr (Ed.) -- UNIVERSE 9 (Dobson, 182 pp, £5.25)

Bar Silverberg's *New Dimensions*, the only original anthology series surviving from the early seventies boom in them, but it seems no longer as dependable as it once was. Bob Shaw's "Frost Animals", which leads off the collection, is far and away its best story, but the rest follow the current American trend towards the public baring of one's inmost soul and beating one's breast in lamentation over its less-than-perfect condition. Those who relish ego-masturbation, heavy guilt trips and similar wallowing in a slough of emotional turmoil will probably relish it, but those who thought art was supposed to enhance life will find it depressing in the extreme.

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

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

Was this a trap, the anticlimax, the bathos to it all. Final death?

It was to no avail. Rick was apparently dead. The fall was too great. Death had supined.

Letters

Why I'm resigning from the BSFA

Having opened this letter, in reply to the overdue notice, you have probably realised that I have taken it upon myself to leave the BSFA. However, I'm not simply going to stop paying the yearly subscription, but do what I think is only fair to the hierarchy of the BSFA; that is, explain why I'm leaving. For it is not really a reflection of what I think of the Association, but of what I have come to think of the genre.

My disillusionment with science fiction began, I suppose, around the time of *Star Wars* and *Cloze Encounters*... which both arrived when I was a true stalwart of the virtues of science fiction, and could explain quite easily why no other fiction mattered except that of the new era! That's not to say I was one of those nauseatingly enthusiastic bods who went to see *Star Wars* about twenty times each week, but I patronised the new science fiction films as much as the next fan. Of course, they are truly crass movies: they have brilliant special effects, but what else? The approval of the majority of under-ten year olds?

I have always said I was born a decade too late. If I had been born in 1950 instead of '64, and in the USA instead of Britain, I feel sure I would've been at Woodstock, out of my mind with the rest of them. Alas, I live in the crushingly realist Britain of the 1980s, and I think this mixture within me, of longing for a hippie revival and being cynical of the new world, is why I started to read Moorcock and Ballard and Disch *et al.* They struck a familiar note within me. That little explanation sounds a bit banal, I know, but the fact remains that I consider Ballard one of the most creative and sensible writers of our time; he understands the world in its new, depraved mantle. And after exhausting Ballard's works who do I turn to? Heinlein? Asimov? Watson? No, not the science fiction writers, but such authors as Jean-Paul Satre, Albert Camus, Hermann Hesse.

You read Camus, and then Asimov, and you realise it's like Salvador Dali and Joan Miro: they're both great artists, but Camus, like Dali, is the more poignant, the more significant. Camus reflects the weaknesses of human existence: Asimov tells us how an electron pump works. Well, what the hell use is that?

I used to cringe when people considered science fiction to be *Star Wars* and nothing else. Now I cringe when I hear what the latest Simak or Clarke is about: transporters in outer space, we're all going to live on a Dyson sphere by the end of 1990... We're not! We're all going to be here worrying about unemployment and inflation and income tax and whether we can avert a nuclear catastrophe (if it hasn't already happened). I don't wish to put down Arthur Clarke's optimistic ramblings merely because they're unlikely, on his timescale, but I think that he and the majority of other science fiction writers could write novels that are both science fiction and relevant.

'It can't be done,' I hear the cry. What about Kurt Vonnegut, John Brunner and Philip K. Dick (when they're being serious)? What about Ballard and Moorcock? Their novels have a meaning. They are not everyone's idea of great authors, I realise, but if Clarke and Asimov can't put meaning into a storyline, beyond the ultra-sophisticated alien observer, what the hell are they doing writing novels?

This letter has turned into a burning tirade against Clarke and Asimov, which I didn't intend. I'm trying to sort out what I think of fiction. I don't condemn just science fiction for having no cause, but the historical romance and all the other weak, page-filling stuff. In these troubled times (old cliché, but just take a look at the world) fiction has to have some vibrant starting point, even if it's only the fact that you can't buy bread as cheaply as you used to. That's okay; it's better than a story about man's difficulty with robots.

God, I'm confused. Society is eventually getting to me, I think. There's an urgency within me that says we've got to come to our senses fast. I hope my own fiction expresses this urgency I feel: it's improved since I stopped *trying* to make it relevant to the science fiction world. Now I've lost the use of the BSFA, why should I shell out six quid a year? Last year's mailings were very good, from the view that they contained an improving journal serving a purpose. I particularly enjoyed the Ballard article, Dave Wingrove's piece on Hesse and his 'Photographs' short story (in *Focus* 2). I admire that piece of fiction a lot -- that's what I'm on about, good fiction, with meaning, that can be accepted as science fiction.

For now I'm withdrawing from the BSFA to nurse my manic depression. Good luck for the future.

Rod L. Jones, 21 Gillity Avenue, Walsall, West Midlands, WS5 3PJ.

** What answer, I wonder, would the adherents of the 'beer money' theory have for Rod? Would they tell him not to worry his teenage head about the problems of the world -- 'look, there's this triffic escapist book to take you away from all that nasty stuff, why not just escape?' Would they tell him that relevance is overrated, that it is not the purpose of fiction -- especially science fiction -- to be relevant to life? Or would they, perhaps, not tell him anything at all, being mightily relieved to get shot of this awkward youth who actually *wants* to be made to think by the fiction he reads? I can't see that Rod would be at all impressed by any of these responses.

I can't go all the way with Rod. I can't accept that it is the *sole* purpose of fiction to be relevant. Some of my favourite novels are immensely irrelevant, but highly enjoyable nonetheless. However, this is somewhat beside the point. If you are looking for relevance then science fiction is not the best place to look. In a genre that prides itself on being wide-ranging -- that some commentators, indeed, claim includes the mainstream -- this is a serious omission. Science fiction need not be relevant all the time, but it should be relevant some of the time; like Rod, I am of the opinion that that some-of-the-time should be rather more of the time than it is at present.

In the meantime, Rod, we're sorry to lose you, and hope that your withdrawal from SF is only 'for now'.

"Tiger! Tiger!"

(Those of you with long memories will remember back to *Vector* 98 and Simon Ounsley's self-styled "dissident's view of Alfred Bester". Those of you with shorter memories will remember that last issue I mentioned a detailed refutation of Simon's view that I received from Alex Eisenstein too late, unfortunately, to publish then. This is an excerpt.)

I rather feel that our impatient critic is responding more to the grotesquery of the story than to Bester's high-handed treatment, but possibly that's unwarranted interpretation on my part. In any event, he clearly doesn't give (*Tiger! Tiger!*) the chance it deserves, and he expects it to be something that it isn't. It isn't, really, a character study... and neither is *Damocles Man*, though that claim has been made for the latter. Both of them are out-and-out romance, very much in the vein of the Romantics of another age. *Tiger! Tiger!* is even about *ideas* of romance... hence the explicit reference thereto in the opening sequence, of romantics decrying the tawdriness of their present age, not able to see the romance, the colour, the marvels and adventure that lies all around them. The book is full of darkness and grotesquery and illusion and disillusion and idealism and despair, and so on. All the things of which romanticism is compounded. But Simon Ounsley has hardly had a taste of it, of what the book offers, of what it delivers. Probably he would not like it; he wants it to taste like bread-and-butter, and not papaya & passion-fruit & meringue.

What can I say? You have seen the tattooed tiger-mask, but not its re-emergence. You've learnt of the Gouffre Martel, the prison under a mountain, but not allowed yourself to live it. You have seen the vendetta-bent Foyle, but not his nemesis/guardian-angel the Burning Man. You know little, I imagine, of the book's developing motifs: the regulation of temporality, the making of men into beasts, the transposition of drugs and pornography with religion, the interplay of altered perception with its ultimate pain-racked synesthesia. You prate of characters and inner life and organic plot, as if you *knew* these things directly as an accomplished writer; as if characters and their whims were the whole matter of fiction, and the world outside bedamned. (Well -- perhaps not damned entire, but relegated to a paltry scale of significance, always and forever, in every case.) I am tired, fed up, weary unto death with people who *know* how "good" stories are written; they heard John Le Carre enunciate it on the telly ten or fifteen years ago, and his truth has made them free, taken the veil from their eyes, cleansed them of impure motives for reading. Exaltation *uber alles*, and only of the most socially redeeming sort. No other exaltation is, you know, acceptable.

I'll be judge, I'll be jury,
said cunning old fury;
I'll try the whole cause and
condemn you to death.

There is *more* to fiction, I say, than "inner space" and inner urges. Ironical to say that in this context, since Bester's prime interest has always been those who act under intensive compulsion. *Demolished Man* just doesn't exist as a story without it; the murder literally has no conscious motive. (This is no secret, of course, to those who have managed to finish the book.) And it is the crux of the mystery element though most readers discount that at the beginning. But outer forces and inner urges must conspire in some way; they must, in a word, *plot*, knit themselves together. And plot is not simply, we go from A to Z; or even, a conflict is examined and then resolved. Many lifeless stories seem to fill those requirements. What else plot is I'm not entirely sure as yet, and nobody else is either -- even those who assure you quite confidently that they are. *All* stories come out of secret places, but writers have their differing methods of evoking them. Some use mechanical looking aids, like outlines, to help them think through a story-line and keep things straight; others make voluminous notes, histories, charts, genealogies and whatnot before proceeding to sentence number one. Others simply daydream a lot, make a lot of false starts, write irrelevant letters to their friends (or to fanzines). Some, it is said, have kept dead fish in their desk drawers, or worn galoshes to bed. Dreaming is a private thing, somebody once said. The daylight acts, logical or otherwise, are aids in one way or another; they are *never* the whole process. So stop telling us, like Adolph Hitler discussing the weather, that "there are two types of plot in the universe". Yes, indeed: those that work, and those that don't. And that has very little to do with initial approaches, I think; whether one starts with character creating incident, or incident shaping the path of character. Really, the argument between the two methods is an argument without force; every writer has some idea of what the characters of a story are going to do, what they are supposed to do; and every writer finds at least a little surprise in what they actually do. Only people who aren't writers think characters are unfettered by auctorial demands, or that authors who write outlines follow them with precision.

Alex Eisenstein, 6208 N. Campbell, Chicago, IL 60659, USA.

The illiness of critical standards

Many of the standards often used to judge SF (especially genre SF) simply don't apply, or at least warrant considerably less critical importance than they are given. Of course, this doesn't go for every single SF book ever written; the field is too diverse for that. But to imagine that, for instance, *Rendezvous with Rama* and *The Dispossessed* ought to be judged by the same standards is simply silly. This is why I disagree with Chris Priest. A science fiction novel must *not* be thought of as a novel first and science fiction second. To do so would be to suggest that the science fiction is merely incidental. It is not. A science fiction novel is a single

entity, and the two elements cannot be considered separately.

SF writers should be encouraged to produce the best that they can, but only as judged by standards that genuinely apply to what they are writing, whether those standards include any or all of the 'normal' literary characteristics or not.

Martin Perry, 2 Wessex Drive, Hatch End, Pinner, Middlesex, HA5 4PY.

♦♦ To say that *Rendezvous with Rama* and *The Dispossessed* cannot be judged by the same standards, or that it is 'simply silly' to attempt to do so, is to say that they cannot be in any way compared, for a comparison based on different standards is useless. I am the second best squash player in my office; Jonah Barrington is the eighth best squash player in the world. Therefore I am a better squash player than Jonah Barrington -- a patently ridiculous assertion. And yet nothing else can be derived from the starting point and the assumption that different standards can be used in comparisons. Are you saying, then, that comparisons have no place in the judgement of SF? Nonsense! Comparisons are ultimately the *only* means by which judgements can be made. Let's see what William Bains has to say on the subject...

The need for critical standards

The message '*War and Peace* is good' seems a little weak. We can bullwork it: '*War and Peace* is very good', or '*War and Peace* is good because...' The former is easy, the latter useful. The former requires detailed knowledge of the reviewer by the reader, but the latter communicates, *uses* the language the reviewer reports to tell us of his findings. Unfortunately the former is seen far more often than the latter. A deceptive variation on it is 'I like *War and Peace* because...', which is a subjective eulogy or, as occasion demands, diatribe, listing any point the writer can be bothered to remember and useless unless we already know our reviewer well enough to know what he would ignore, what amplify. In fannish affairs the West-Pickersgill school of reviewing successfully uses the '*War and Peace* is very good' type, since those reading the blood-soaked words on dissections of coelenterate fanzines know both reviewer and, probably, target. They can convey a message in a page of witty abuse with fair certainty of accurate translation. The 'greats' of popular speech and writing of all ages may do the same, as everyone is familiar with their style; the audience has only to revel in the language of a putdown by Waugh or Dr Johnson, Churchill or Wedgy.

Should your debate in *Vector* generate a set of Rules for SF (I know you will avoid that, but can you control your readers?) the imitators of the W-G school of criticism (no names) will leap upon them. 'Heinlein defies nine of Smith's Seventeen Strictures, and thus typifies the crap-filled wool-brains who only win their misbegotten Hugos...' Or those of the subtler schools: 'The number of Vector Violations Asimov manages to miss may be counted on the fingers of one foot.' All grist to the mill for turning '*War and Peace* is very good' into a facsimile of '*War and Peace* is good because...'

As ever, a worthless exercise, a Jaberwocky with solemn warnings about meaningless threats. This kind of reviewing is the pit current amateur SF critics have fallen into, and why there is such a continual muttering in the BSFA's hallowed columns about them. Wit or abuse, elegant writing or length of digression are used to build an atmosphere of erudition and depth that is lacking in reality, bolstered only by stock phrases and political/artistic poses with little real relevance. We need the *Punch* advert which suggested: 'The subjects of 'in depth' interviews will be taught 'depth'.'

William Bains, 182 Sedgemoor Road, Coventry, CV3 4DZ.

♦♦ I want a *Vector* reviewer to be able to say '*War and Peace* is good because...' -- to be able to give a solid, worthwhile opinion about any book he reviews. If he can do it with wit, style and panache, so much the better. But if he can offer only the wit, style and panache I don't want to know. (Incidentally, it is quite a bit harder to say why a book is good than why it is bad, and much easier to get carried away with entertaining abuse about a bad book.)

The next letter arrived as a 'Standpoint' article in response to Joseph Nicholas' piece 'Guns of the Timberland'. The first two paragraphs reintroduced Joseph's main point; the letter continued:

More rules?

For the sake of the production of good science fiction, it would be better if we abandoned our term for the genre all together. The best chance of allowing a good, new, genuinely late twentieth-century literature to develop lies in looking at science fiction writers as a group of writers who share influences and aims, and certain aspects of style, and in leaving off talking of 'science fiction', as a self-existing, definitive 'type' of fiction, and 'its' writers. We should not forget that our particular fetish-literature is the product of those who write it, and that no writer is the representative of some benign moving spirit called Science Fiction. The way we should look at science fiction writers is the same as the way we look at other groups of writers in literature. The metaphysical poets are often compared and contrasted, in as much as their work has common elements of style, but this does not mean that they are to be spoken of as belonging to some autonomous entity outside the normal literary world, and therefore having standards independent of all the rest of literature.

Individual writers' styles, directions and artistic aims must be taken into account. It would be unforgivable to dog a writer with a set of rules and regulations abstracted from a vague consensual definition of science fiction based on popular tastes. In creating a monolith out of science fiction, we are in danger of setting up general measures of science-fictionality so narrow and cramping that the genre will become too conservative for any literary artist to flourish. That is why the comparison of writers of similar interests must not be taken to the level of a matching against science fiction's own paradigm, and must be seen as simply the comparison of comparable writers' work under the larger critical umbrella of literature.

The statement by Gregory Benford which Joseph quotes toys dangerously with the notion of giving science fiction special treatment within literature. Benford hopes earnestly for 'a theory which evaluates when the "SF reading sense" can be offset against "traditional literary virtues" ... a recognisable standard for judging when the trade-off between these two standards is legitimate', and adds, 'We need a way to decide when the style, characterisation etc. must give way to specifically science fictional purposes.' I don't believe this 'SF reading sense' exists, and I think it is nonsense to talk of 'science fictional purposes': these terms herd together all readers and all writers of science fiction under one burdensome title. Benford implies that when we read Harlan Ellison we are looking for more or less the same cues as when we read Frank Herbert, and that, being science fiction writers, John Wyndham and Joe Haldeman have everything in common. This is all connected, of course, with the elderly 'definition' problem, but the spirit which seeks for a set of criteria to test science fiction against is the same as that which seeks to find a defining formula for it. This spirit is conservative and confining. To foster really original writing, we should not be looking for two standards of merit which may be traded off on one another, but holding firmly to the one of literary excellence, while examining the individual contributions of writers to literature, their pursuit of their particular artistic goals, and how far their realisation of their own aims can be called good literature.

David Penn, 23 Queen's Approach, Uckfield, Sussex, TN22 1RU.

♦♦ It would be tempting to put Martin Perry (above) and David Penn together and let them fight out the issue of standards. (Perhaps they will anyway.) I tend very much towards David's opinion that a single standard is required, and that to have a separate one for SF is asking for trouble -- as you will have realised from my editorial last issue. However, I cannot agree with him that there is no such thing as a 'science fiction reading sense', taking that phrase in its broadest meaning. There is *something* about SF (don't ask me what) that the traditional standard of 'literary excellence' can't cope with, and which needs to be considered. Where I violently disagree with people such as Martin Perry is in the extent to which it needs to be

considered. They tend to take the view that it is the *only* thing which needs to be considered. David Penn would disregard it completely. I maintain that it must be given its due weight in any assessment of an SF book. The 'SF element' may be the aspect into which an author has poured his creative energy, as in, for example, Larry Niven's works. It may be only the background and of small relevance, as with Ursula LeGuin. It may be non-existent, as with Henry Fielding, or Damon Runyon, or Jane Austen (I *like* Jane Austen, and she will appear in *Vector* more often than professors of English might find comfortable)... but this is wandering off the point. David implicitly denies the possibility of there being any literary merit whatsoever in 'SF elements', which is rather harsh (to say the least) on those writers who directed their efforts mainly towards them. He also begs the question of what comprises literary excellence -- but I won't pursue that point until next issue, by which time my editorial will be considering value judgements in detail, and no doubt annoying a considerable number of people...

Critical insight

It seems apparent by inspection that there are no absolute, unwavering critical standards in literature or any other art form. Beethoven thought Handel was the all-time great composer in music, and he was also responsible for the rediscovery of an interesting, unknown minor composer called J.S. Bach. It is apparent that there have been changes in critical viewpoint since then, and similar though less dramatic incidents are evident throughout the arts -- science fiction not excluded. Equally well there seems to be a vague agreement (I hesitate to write 'general agreement') that some works of literature are better than others, and that even science fiction in parts may produce something less ephemeral than the average paperback in W.H. Smith's. And we tend to call that common thread 'Literature' and expect there to be a discipline called 'Criticism' which deals with it.

Just as the publishing business keeps going because people like reading books, and as a consequence it behoves the writer to be entertaining and enlightening, so the criticism business keeps going because people like discussing what they read. And it equally behoves the critic to be enlightening and entertaining. Just as those novels which we consider particularly good are those which show us something new (hence the name), but which at the same time seem to be talking about something which we ourselves consider significant, so will the critic, if he is doing his job properly, show us something new and significant in something we already think ourselves familiar with.

The key word in criticism, it seems to me, is therefore not objectivity (absolute standards in some all-time hall of fame), nor subjective reaction, but *insight*. Value judgements are all very well, but I suspect that it is a lost cause to try to say certain books are valuable because they meet the following criteria. Instead I believe that the things we value, we value because of what seems to be the significance in them, the depth of insight, and the insights we can gain through them. And what we call 'values' are things we discover later by looking for the common factor in the things we value. Peano's definition of number -- seven is the common factor of all those groups that have seven things in them.

Bob Parkinson, 33 Langdon Avenue, Aylesbury, Bucks.

We Also Heard From...

Arnold Aiken, who will probably be in next issue's 'Standpoint'; Simon Bostock; Steve Ince, who discussed other genres of fiction, and came to the frustrating conclusion that the majority of SF readers, being non-BSFA members, prefer Alan Dead Foster because he washes whiter (not his exact words, but that's the gist of them) -- horribly convincing, isn't it; Joseph Nicholas, whose thoughts on 'fairness' have been taken into account in the editorial (as BSFA reviewing boss he has to be granted this privilege: also it saves me having to type out any more letters); Andy Sawyer; and Dave Wingrove, who thought my editorial last time a 'good start' (that's why I put it first). 12 letters from 800-odd members. 1½. Not very *big*, is it? Not what you'd call a *huge* response. Sort of less than *overwhelming*. In a word, *small*.

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- 90: Nov/Dec 1978 - An Interview with Frederik Pohl; The Best of Hamilton and Brackett by Brian Stableford; Dispossession by Steev Higgins.
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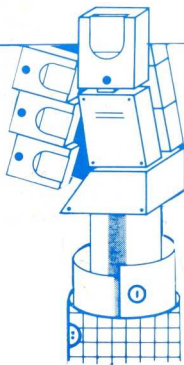
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