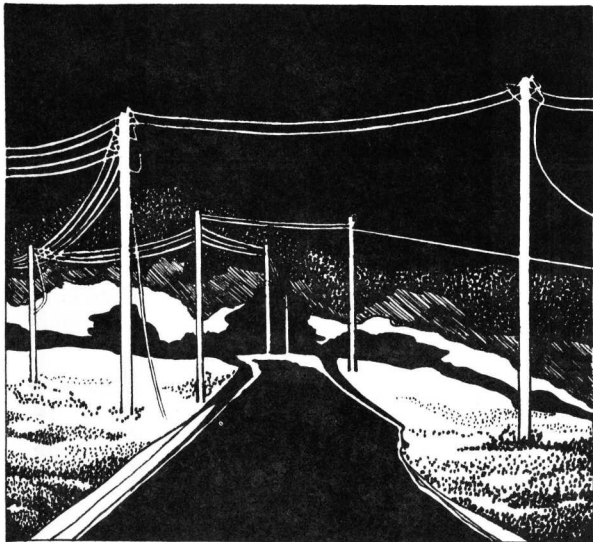


VECTOR

The Critical Journal of the BSFA

75p



*INSIDE: Arthur C Clarke Richard Cowper
David Langford Mike Dickinson
Martyn Taylor and others....*

bsfa

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VECTOR

The Critical Journal of the BSFA

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VECTOR

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Pete Lyon

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THIS ISSUE

... is transitional, in many ways. First, *Vector* is reverting to a bi-monthly schedule, so that every mailing will contain it. This follows the cessation of *Focus*, and as a result of the Committee's total inability to think of anything else to replace it. Because of the extra work, I've asked Paul Kincaid to join the staff, with the title of 'Features Editor'; naturally, he accepted -- when the BSFA calls... What this means in theory is that he will be responsible for soliciting, begging, borrowing and receiving the feature articles; on past experience, from one to three per issue. How it will work in practice we don't know; we, and you, will find out over the next few issues. Another consequence of the demise of *Focus* is that some of the feature articles in *Vector* will be of a type that might have appeared in *Focus*. This means essentially articles about writing, or about SF from the writer's viewpoint. I'm afraid that *Vector* will not be publishing fiction. Unless *Focus* returns in some guise or other, or *Matrix* begins publishing it, the BSFA will not be publishing fiction. I would be interested to hear your views on this, because if there is sufficient support for the BSFA to publish fiction we will obviously have to reconsider the position. Incidentally, if you have any comments on *Focus* 4 and are wondering where to send them, send them to me. In the revised scheme of things, I shall still be looking after the Standpoints and the letters, and Joseph Nicholas remains editor i/c books.

This issue also sees the fourth and last editorial "Towards A Critical Standard", in which I reach, if not a conclusion exactly, at least a convenient stopping point. Future discussion of the subject, if such there be, will be in articles, Standpoints and letters. In this issue, the discussion has even reached the book review column, with huge reviews of critical works by David Murray and Joseph Nicholas. These are so big that they are acting as substitute for an article, with the result that we have only one of those this time.

However, this too is pretty big. Martyn Taylor writes about SF on U.K. television in an article entitled "SF On U.K. Television" and takes a critical look at the standards of that SF, both as SF and as television.

Standpoints this time come from Mary Gentle, considering science fiction in the post-literate society -- will written SF survive at all? --; Cy Chauvin, who takes issue with the philosophical implications of John Varley's story "The Persistence Of Vision"; Iain R Byers, who defends the right of people not to respond to *Vector* and other fanzines; and myself, responding to Iain and explaining why I, and other editors, want and encourage response.

For those of you convinced that no *Vector* reviewers like anything, the book review column this time contains reviews of novels people seem to have liked a lot: *The Shadow Of The Torturer*, *Engine Summer*, *Noonbird*, *Valis* and *Margaret And I* among them.

The letters are lively and outspoken; good stuff.

NEXT ISSUE

... will have only words on the cover, or possibly a photograph of the chaotic *Vector* production centre (my sitting room) -- unless a few great artists out there Do Something. I insist on retaining the logo (*VECTOR* -- The Critical Journal of the BSFA -- 75p) at the top in the style it has had for the last three issues and the BSFA logo at the bottom. The positioning of the issue number, date and ISSN number is not so critical, and nor is the lettering style. However, I do rather like the way John McFarlane positioned them last time, and as they are this. Within that framework all I ask is that the artwork be good and original. (All!) I will say that I am not much impressed by spaceships or hairy barbarians...

As regards interior artwork, I'm not terribly keen on it. Let me explain that. I do not see *Vector* as a showcase for art in the same way as it is a showcase for writing. In other words, any art will be subordinate to the writing and will thus specifically illustrate an article, or be a heading for an article or section. For example, in this issue Pete Lyon has done a new heading for the book review column, which I shall probably be using for a few issues yet. I should like to see headings for the Editorial, Standpoint and Letters sections.

The exception to this rule, as you might guess, is cartoons. I am always prepared to use funny cartoons -- either full page ones such as D West has done (and will do again next issue) or single frame ones.

The (by now) traditional page-filling squibs have been carefully extracted by me from *The Man With Absolute Motion* by Silas Water. (Last issue's careful reading of *The Number Of The Beast* was carried out by Dave Langford, who was upset that I didn't credit him; personally I'd have wanted it kept secret.)

"...you may see the general now. Take the red carpet, please, and follow your shoes."

"You will take the orange carpet to your left," said a voice from his glass shoes.

Editorial Towards a Critical Standard

Part IV

In *Vector* 99, helped by Joseph Nicholas, I established a need for a critical standard that considered SF as part of literature, not as a special case requiring special treatment. The standard would have to give SF its due, by acknowledging what had been variously called the 'SF reading sense', 'idea', 'ideative content' or even the 'sense of wonder', as an equivalent element with style, character or plot, without going overboard and claiming that 'idea' was all that mattered. The standard would have to be flexible, not rigid or prescriptive, and also fair. This provoked a certain amount of response in *Vector* 100, typified by Martin Perry who said that it was impossible to compare, say, *Rendezvous With Rama* with *The Dispossessed*, Helen McNabb who agreed that a literary approach was required, and David Penn who denied that the 'SF reading sense' should be given any credence at all.

In *Vector* 100 I set out five steps forming a framework for a critical standard. These were (i) that the critic should be aware of his own prejudices; (ii) to determine the author's intent; (iii) to evaluate how well the author has achieved his intent; (iv) to compare the book with others of the same type; and (v) to compare the book with all books. (As Chris Priest pointed out, this last does not include such books as algebra text books or biographies.) In *Vector* 101 I discussed types of novel, defining the dramatic novel, the chronicle, the novel of character, the period novel and the novel of action. Arnold Akien wrote about genre fiction and David Wingrove about criticism. Throughout, there was considerable comment from many people, too many to mention by name.

Now the time has come to tie up the loose ends. Let's go back to the beginning and ask again just what is our objective. We are trying to achieve a critical standard that treats SF in a literary manner, not as an isolated 'ghetto' with its own rules and ways of doing things and 'standards' of excellence. Therefore we have to adhere to traditional literary virtues -- there's no avoiding it! Any other course leads straight back to the 'ghetto'. But we also have to account for the fact that SF has often seemed not to have received a fair deal from traditional literary criticism, and the reason for this is that the traditional literary virtues make no allowance for the 'idea' in SF. However, the answer is to add to the traditional literary virtues, not to replace them, as all too many SF critics have done in the past. "Traditional literary criticism does not acknowledge the self-evident virtues of science fiction," they said. "Therefore we must discard all to do with literature, and judge SF by our own standards." -- a remarkably narrow-minded attitude, compounded by the subsequent failure to come up with anything coherent as a replacement. "Our own standards" were not standards at all, merely individual whim masquerading as such. It is a narrow-minded attitude arising (as so often) from fear.

The members of the 'science fiction is special' school are against literature because it frightens them. They are afraid they will not measure up to the standards set long ago by literature. In most cases the fear is well justified because most SF simply isn't up to those standards. It's much easier to retreat into the 'ghetto', amongst people of like minds, than it is to improve. The finger pointing at incompetence can be ignored, even ridiculed. In fact, it's better to ridicule, because by shouting loudly, taking the offensive, the rabble can be roused and the dissident element who have looked over the wall subdued. But that is all the argument for the specialness of the SF ghetto is -- literary rabble rousing. It disguises the fact that most SF writers are not very good writers. What they are good at, some of them, is

yarn-spinning. They can tell a tale with the best. (Did anyone ever tell such lies as a science fiction writer?) So the virtue to praise above all others is the ability to tell a story, to come up with the most outrageous narrative. How often have you heard SF writers and critics (the two often being the same) say that the only thing that matters in a novel is that it tell a good story, and that to hold any other view is literary pretension and 'pseudery'. Rabble rousing again, of course; I can almost imagine such writers reaching for their revolvers at the mention of 'literature'. It's arrant nonsense, and only the fearful philistines can possibly hold such a view -- but there seems a lot of them about. Story telling is a part of the literary whole. It is possibly the oldest part, deriving from the time when stories were truly told and not written, but it is only a part. Even the oldest stories -- myths, fables and folk tales -- were not just stories. Aesop's Fables are deliberately didactic, and myths and folk tales are rarely lacking a moral.

Besides story and moral there are other elements in a novel or any narrative fiction. There is plot, which is not the same as story, but rather the way the story fits together, the relationship between its aspects. There is character, the reality and development of the people in the story, its static and dynamic aspects. Even the rabble rousers pay lip service to character ("Use a strong and sympathetic lead character"), and they revere plot as much as story; I suspect they can't tell the two apart. Then there are other elements which the rabble rousers regard with suspicion, since they are overtly literary: elements such as dramatic sense and timing, style, use of language, imagery and metaphor. And in science fiction there is 'idea'. These are all elements that must be considered in any evaluation of a work of narrative fiction, and no one of them has absolute precedence over the others. To claim, say, that character is always more important than plot is only to fall into a different pit from the rabble rousers, and does not advance the cause of literary criticism a jot.

Of course, in any single work one element may be more important than another, because the author has chosen to have it so. Ian Watson generally seems to choose 'idea' as his main element, subordinating the others to it, while Ursula Le Guin prefers character and Larry Niven story and plot. The critic must evaluate the choice and the use made of it, and there are no 'right' answers.

So, the famed 'critical standard' has merely brought us back to the elements of narrative fiction, has it? Plot, character, style and the rest? Well, we knew that already, so why has it taken three and a bit editorials to get there?

The answer to that is that on the way we have looked anew at those elements, and have not merely accepted them. We also have a framework to fit them into. Let's take another look at step one, prejudice. The main prejudice a critic is likely to have that will affect his criticism is a prejudice towards, a preference for, one or more of the elements, or even an order of preferences encompassing them all. My own preference is for the interplay of character and plot, what I termed last time (after Edwin Muir) the dramatic novel. This is not from any theoretical standpoint, but from the very practical one that the novels I have enjoyed most have been dramatic novels, such as *The Dispossessed* and *Malafrena* (Le Guin), *Wuthering Heights* (Emily Bronte), *Emma* (Jane Austen) and *The Ebony Tower* (John Fowles). But this is not an exclusive preference. I have also considerably enjoyed *The First Circle* (Solzhenitsyn) and *Dhalgren* (Delany), which are chronicles in that the characters are changed by the events but some of the events are so massive that they are unchanged by the characters -- the fundamental difference between chronicles and dramatic novels. I am also a sucker for style. I would not go so far as Flaubert, who considered that the perfect novel would consist of style and nothing else, but distinctive good style can hold me. My liking for Charteris's "Saint" books is based on style and little else; they contain little else. Similarly for Damon Runyon's short stories and Ernest Bramah's "Kai Lung" stories. And I like some works

in which the story element is uppermost, notably the shorts of Lafferty, who tells stories taller than most, and better. A pretty wide prejudice, eh? No, my main preference is decidedly for the dramatic novel (and from what I've read of theirs, Joe Nicholas and Paul Kincald tend to agree with me), but my liking for examples of other types is proof that there is no 'right' way to approach fiction, either as writer or critic or reader. Anything can be done well; it very rarely is. So in going the long way round I have shown that the critic must be prepared to give credit for a good work that is not of the type he prefers.

This ties in with the second step. If the author had no intention of writing a dramatic novel it is hardly fair to complain that he didn't produce one, even though that might be one's own preference. Of course, it makes life harder for the critic in step three, when he comes to evaluate how well the author achieved his intention, but a critic shouldn't expect to have an easy life.

Steps four and five, the comparisons: I've been sidestepping expounding on these in detail, as you must have noticed. A critic's view of a book will, initially at least, be based on a feeling he has about it. He will 'feel' that it is a good or a bad or a mediocre book, as will any reader. For the reader that feeling may well be enough -- one can enjoy something without necessarily knowing why -- but for the critic it is not. He must articulate his feeling so that others can understand it. Fairly evidently, the feeling will be based on something the book possesses that other books do not, or lacks that other books do not, and only by comparison can he discover what that 'something' is. How shall he make these comparisons? Native wit, intelligence, knowledge, experience, philosophy... In other words, that part of it, the difficult part, is down to the critic himself.

Which sounds like a cop-out, but isn't. I said at the outset that any standard had to be flexible, had to allow for disagreements between critics, and this is the place for it. If I started laying down rules for comparison now -- marks out of ten for plot, out of twenty for characterisation, and so on -- then we would have a rigid standard, and one which no one else would agree with. Arnold Axien said, "Probably the best test of a story's worth is how well it ages." What we are -- perhaps presumptuously -- attempting to do with a critical standard is to predict how well a story will age, to second guess posterity, and the only way open to us is to look at what has stood the test of time, discover what has enabled them to do so, and apply that discovery to new works. The success of the prediction, or otherwise, will depend on the ability of the critic. Like I said, a critic shouldn't expect an easy life.

(As an aside, I have heard protestations, and printed a couple of them, to the effect that "you can't compare novel X with novel Y because they are too different." To which I say "Bunkum!" or some such word beginning with 'b'. To start with, anyone who says it about two novels must have made a rudimentary comparison already, to know that the novels are "too different". It may well be that a further and more detailed comparison is beyond the ability of such a person, but it is by no means impossible for others. There is always a way. A second point is that it may not be necessary to make that particular comparison in an evaluation. Nor is it necessary for a critic to reveal his comparisons to the world, so long as he has made the necessary ones in his own mind and can find another way of explaining them.)

Another reason for taking the long way round to the elements of narrative fiction was to open up a discussion, to question accepted wisdom, to throw in new ideas and concepts, to widen perspectives for critics, reviewers, readers and perhaps writers alike. So, in that sense, what is important about my series of editorials is not the arrival at a critical standard, but the journey towards it. I don't think we have arrived because the discussion is still wide open. I didn't think we would -- hence the title of the series. But the journey has been valuable, and will continue to be so. *Vector* remains open for it.

SF ON U.K. TELEVISION

Martyn Taylor

First question: does the beast exist?

Second question: if it does, is it important?

Answers: yes, and yes.

Starting off backwards, television SF is important because television is important. It is a mass medium, going directly into the homes of an inconceivable number of us all over the world. Only a decreasingly small minority do not have day to day access to a screen. To these people SF is *Star Wars*, 'Doc' Smith books on W H Smith shelves, the so-called conundra of 2001. If SF is to break out of the ghetto then these are the people we have to seduce. They man the watch towers.

As regards the first question, any definition of SF is an excuse for gratuitous violence, so I will confine myself to giving a list of shows I will at least mention in the body of this review. I suggest that it constitutes a body of work 'Joe Public' regards as SF. *Star Trek*, *Dr Who*, *Battlestar Galactica*, *The Incredible Hulk*, *The Six Million Dollar Man*, *Batman*, *Wonderwoman*, *Space 1999*, *Thunderbirds*, *Captain Scarlet*, *Joe 90*, *The Martian Chronicles*, *Brave New World*, *Hitch Hiker's Guide To The Galaxy*, *Quatermass*, *Logan's Run*, 1990, *Doomwatch*, *Blake's 7*, *Sapphire And Steel*, and *Buck Rogers*.

It is not an exhaustive or definitive list, but I found myself surprised to see quite how long it is. Hardly a week goes by without at least one SF show being transmitted. We may argue that this is not enough, but what justice is there in such a claim? Compare the treatment of SF with pop music. This is the most significant cultural force of the century, reaching greater numbers even than television, crossing all barriers of language, tradition and culture. Yet what exposure does this mighty phenomenon get on our screens? One, maybe two, shows per channel per week, and one of those is *Top Of The Pops*! It is my contention that both SF and pop exposure are constrained by identical cultural influences and imperatives acting upon the individuals who run the television companies. These are members of the 'establishment', drawn from that pool of the cultural, educational, economic and social 'elite' that is centred upon Oxbridge. SF, like pop, is a youthful, vulgar, vibrant and immediate form that conforms hardly at all to the norms in which these people have been steeped from birth. Whether the command of the higher points of our society by these people is a good thing or not is political question. For the purposes of this discussion I will just regard the situation as fact.

Just as Oxbridge is defensive about non-classic forms, so is it nervous of science. In antiquity (the era in which Oxbridge is most comfortable) science equalled philosophy and they could cope with that, control it. In the middle ages (almost as 'safe' as Athens) scientists were alchemists, harmless duffers trying to turn lead into gold and occasionally invoking Satan. In Oxbridge terms it is only yesterday that these uppity scientist johnnies forgot their place and went stamping among the dreaming spires, splitting atoms and infinities with equal abandon, and daring to suggest that the study of *Beowulf* is

not the most relevant activity for contemporary man. The traditionalists suspect that scientists have discovered Aristotle's lever and fulcrum while fearing that they may also have found a place to stand. In their cosmos the earth does not -- cannot -- move, even about the sun. This terror is understandable and is not actively malign, but it does account for the fact that most of the characters representing science are made comic or subhuman, thereby defusing their subversive potential.

Anyone wondering how Oxbridge has managed to infect American television is advised to take a look at the architecture of many American colleges and ask themselves whether it is just the brickwork that has been imported.

Given such a situation, are our expectations concerning SF on television realistic? I do not believe that they are. We have an understandable reluctance to acknowledge the cultural hostility towards SF of those who control the companies, and a parallel reluctance to accept that SF is a 'minority sport' -- although would that the BBC treat SF as it treats that ultimate minority sport, horse jumping! Most important, however, is a misunderstanding of the nature of television, and the difficulties this poses for SF.

Much SF is grandiloquent, while television is intimate. SF, almost by definition, is imaginative, while television is domestic, mundane. SF wants to inspire, create questions, while television is intended to do the exact opposite. Of a deeper significance, however, is that the forms of expression used in SF are largely active. The mere act of opening a book and beginning to read implies some active co-operation with the author. Cinema involves us in several efforts -- physical in getting our carcasses to the cinema, financial in laying out our increasingly hard-earned cash, intellectual and emotional in choosing to spend our time in this rather than any other way. We conspire with the film maker. We go some way to meet him, willing, even eager, to react. Television, on the other hand, is essentially passive. It requires no effort. If a programme enthralls or offends us, our first reaction is to shrug and wait to be drowned by the next programme we know to be coming in a matter of seconds. Not that we lack for shrill reaction to television programmes. The importance of television in our society is fundamental. Programmes can have an effect. Why else does Mary Whitehouse stalk our collective consciousness like some latter day tyrannosaurus rex? All newspapers have television critics, yet how many have more television columnists than film, theatre and classical music writers despite the television audience being several orders of magnitude than those audiences? You will have guessed the answer. Those audiences are drawn from the 'elite', and before our haloes get to glow too brightly, remember that many of us are members of, or aspirants to, that 'elite'. The name of the game is cultural and intellectual imperialism.

But there is more to it than that. If he were alive today Karl Marx might well change his mind and describe television, not religion, as the opium of the people. Television is one of the major engines by which our socio-political status quo is maintained. A graphic illustration of this is given by the continuing refusal of the BBC to transmit *The War Game*. I do not subscribe to the conspiracy theory regarding self-censorship on television, ascribing it rather to the cultural instincts of the individuals involved and their monstrous paternalism towards us.

There are other pressures, though, and we are unrealistic if we ignore them. Leaving aside the religio-menopausal hysteria of the Mary Whitehouses, the BBC is funded by the political football of the licence fee, while the independent companies are dependent upon advertising revenues. We may not like it, but "he who pays the piper calls the tune". These social and financial pressures are such that we are fortunate to have any programmes more intellectually stimulating than *Dallas* and *The Benny Hill Show*. I suspect that the corpse of Lord Reith attains considerable rotational velocity whenever the innocent

anarchies of *Dr Who* appear on our screens. SF worlds are imaginary, although hopefully not too unrealistic. Television, however, has to sell its body in a marketplace where there is only one true god, and his name is Mammon. Such an environment is not conducive to any imagination, let alone some of the more difficult and strenuous imaginings of good SF.

Which is not to say that we should be unquestioningly grateful for whatever SF crumbs the companies condescend to give us. We must delight in good shows, excoriate bad ones, analyse why which is which, and hopefully see our way to the creation of an environment in which the less restricted imaginings of SF writers can find their way into the homes of billions. We must establish that critique. I hope the following discussion will give cause for debate.

Star Trek is the most popular television SF show, and has passed into the general cultural atmosphere we all breathe. Its influence has been as seminal as *Wagon Train* or *The Foreyte Saga*. It has become the touchstone (God help us) for all SF shows. What seems clear is that it was not conceived as 'hard' SF, but as a typical adventure show transplanted into an exotic habitat, that habitat having as little 'reality' as any cowboy ranch or cops-and-robbers New York street.

Which is not to say that the setting is not significant. The potential for exoticism liberated the writers from the cage of earthbound settings, if not earthbound plots. What would the writers of so many cowboy shows have given -- having written themselves into a corner with the injuns closing in and the cavalry stuck in Fort Sumpter suffering from dysentery -- to have their Captain Kirk be able to whisper into a cigarette packet, "Four to beam up, Scotty"? If not their right arms then surely a finger or two from their left hands! The ancestry of *Star Trek* is demonstrated by the fact that such tricks are only rarely used as the resolution to situations. The gadgetry can get Kirk and Co. into tight spots, but the means by which they extricate themselves would have been familiar to anyone switching from a re-run of *The Buccaneers* to the first series of *Star Trek*. Only the names and the fancy dress had been changed to protect the guilty parties. The place of *Star Trek* is firmly in an historical development that left the viewer on well trodden ground, even if it was called Star Base Five.

The tradition of 'action' shows is that they are character based. The audience is given heroes with whom it can identify, empathise. The reason is straightforward. In the real world who gives a damn if thousands of Vietnamese (or Cypriots, Lebanese, Ulstermen) are slaughtered? They are foreigners, gooks, subhumans. It is only when Johnny gets hit that it becomes tragedy. In reality they all die, but there is only emotional reality for us when it is one of 'ours', just as our team is always honourable while their team cheats. It may be a sick reflection upon us, but it is the truth and television exploits it. *Star Trek* gives us flesh and blood heroes we can recognise: Kirk, the war hero with whom no woman is safe (one of the nastier facets of the show, especially seeing as he is 'wedded' to his ship); irascible, all too human McCoy; the (very) pneumatic Uhura; the ethnic Sulu; the comic relief Chekov. Together they are an invincible composite of the arts, sciences and humanities, good team players. Apart they are weak, vulnerable on a human scale. Was this fiendish calculation by Gene Roddenberry? Or was it luck to create characters and then be well served by their players?

No one could ever accuse *Star Trek* of subtlety, especially in its symbolism. The name of the ship -- the U S S Enterprise -- was, at the time of the series, that of the latest in a line of very powerful capital ships. The nuclear carrier was the ultimate weapon. It made folks in Wyoming sleep easier at night. The name meant as much as Hood once meant in the U.K. Again, at the time of the series the canon of nasties eating away at the foundation of God, mom and apple pie included Uncle Ho, Fidel Castro and Dr Benjamin Spock. Is

it really a coincidence that the pointy eared, semi-human science officer of diabolic appearance is called Spock? Two sublimated threats downed with one stone! America may look like Goliath to the rest of us, but Americans have always identified with David. The show itself is a thinly disguised odyssey and Homer would recognise Odysseus's descendent in Kirk, ever ready to expose himself to the lure of the sirens when any normal commanding officer of such a ship would send an expendable junior officer in his place. Then, what better symbol for pre-Watergate America could there be than the rocket powered spermatozoa that is the Enterprise, its five year mission to impregnate the Universe (and, by extension, God, who would have saved us all a lot of trouble if he had only had the foresight to let Jesus be born an American). Like any popularly successful television show, *Star Trek* reinforced the self-esteem and prejudices of its audience.

Since 2001, visual SF has come to be identified with trick effects. The traditional nature of *Star Trek* is demonstrated by the limited effects used. There are only a few cloth and cardboard sets, light guns, the transporter and some strategically placed lights and loud noises. In much SF the effects are to divert attention from the poverty of the characterisation, and if we accept the Watson/Niven thesis of SF characterisation, *Star Trek* is little more than *Dallas* with wings. This is the reason for its enduring success.

The show is, of course, well served by its two central actors. Leonard Nimoy has no need of me to present his credentials as actor or human being; suffice to say that he really is not Spock. William Shatner, however, gives the appearance of a typical television matinee idol -- easy on the eye and empty between the ears. So I thought until I saw him irretrievably shred the reputation of BBC science pundit James Burke on a chat show. Shatner revealed himself as an acute, educated man, and a thoughtful actor, thus throwing new light on the two-dimensionality of Kirk. It is, though, the curious chemistry between the two that is part of the lasting attraction of the show.

Why, then, did the show die? It died because it had outlived its time. There were no more 'great' episodes, just scripts written by pure television writers without the SF imagination. The cast had come to acknowledge quite openly on screen the vacuity of what they were doing, sometimes indulging themselves in performances that almost match *Dr Who* for tongue in cheek self-knowledge -- one gangster episode springs to mind. The life had gone. We may lament its passing (and look forward with trepidation to its resurrection) but a viewing of the unfortunate movie is enough to show the direction in which the show must inevitably have moved.

Star Trek is a successful show, and if it sometimes succeeded as an SF show it is because the creators managed to build upon its traditional foundation and transcend the limitations of that tradition. The legacy of the show is incalculable -- for good and bad -- and on the whole it is better than we have any right to expect.

Which brings us to the great SF survivor, *Dr Who*. This show began life back in 1966 as a children's show with 'added trickery'. Then, the BBC thought SF was for kids, which view is not many parsecs from much of the SF 'establishment' (Christopher Priest in *Foundation* 21). Fantasy was for kids who could not cope with 'real' drama. Given that the sixties was the heyday of the Mercerian uprising in television drama perhaps they were right, although you must look hard to see anything of Mercer and the rest in the current dramatic output of British television. The fact that *Dr Who* is children's television accounts for its longevity. The hierarchy at the BBC has always been hostile towards popular drama that evidences any questioning attitudes. That *Dr Who* is SF and for kids means that it can be safely ignored. Whatever the reason, may thanks be given.

The survival of the show is one of its merits. It has survived, if not intact at least recognisable (and recognisably better!). It has given us one of the

truly enduring heroes of British television, the good doctor himself, and indisputably the most significant baddies -- your own, your very own Daleks! These mechanical monsters are creations of genius, great SF achievements (even if they do fall neatly into place in the liberal-intellectual hall of horrors), the more so because of the vast audience they have reached. The creators of the show are well aware of the status of the Daleks as folk heroes/villains, as is demonstrated by their repeated attempts to create new monsters capable of sending new generations of kids diving behind sofas to peep at the screen through the gaps between their fingers. Some attempts have been successful -- the Cybermen (ever wonder where you saw Darth Vader and the Cylons before?) -- but most have been doomed to failure by the cynical sophistication of kids today and the impossibility of matching the standard they have set for themselves. The penalty of success.

Dr Who has entertained us for fifteen years, almost two generations in television terms. For a contemporary, imaginative drama this is unprecedented, and a consideration of why this is so will lead to a better understanding of the medium and a sounder basis on which to consider other shows. The television series is a strenuous form and only a very few maintain their life beyond a second or third run, yet *Dr Who* has maintained itself, becoming more interesting (and entertaining) since the earlier, more determinedly child oriented shows. It has taken on the form of mini-series of four or so episodes (about 100 minutes of transmission time) with a seemingly defined structure: Doctor and companions arriving, separating into danger, reuniting and then triumphing. Within this structure the writer is permitted to explore his ideas and spread his wings without running (too much) risk of drying up half-way through. The structure works consistently, which is some compensation for its occasionally irritating rigidity.

Then the show has been created largely by an evolving body of 'young lions' -- writers, producers, directors etc at the beginning of their careers with ideas to burn and uninhibited enough to try and execute them. Sometimes they have failed, gone over the top, but this is inevitable in an essentially experimental situation and they are rarely boring. Achievement implies risk taking. The stories themselves have moved with the times. Physical monsters have given way to metaphysical or metaphorical monsters, reflecting the change in preception of SF writers from the 'Heinlein' sixties, through the 'Moorcock' seventies, into the 'Priest' (?) eighties. Time travel has ceased to be enough. Now we must consider the meaning of time, life, the universe and everything. These trends may have disenchanted the kids, but have made the show more intriguing to us more adult viewers.

Television drama, as I have said, is founded on character. *Dr Who* has but one character, but what a character! Over the years we have seen William Hartnell's crusty schoolmasterliness, Patrick Troughton's furrowed brow concern, Jon Pertwee's fey, sometimes Goonish, humour, and a brand of affectionate ham parody from Tom Baker. Each portrayal has drawn from what went before but become unique, individual -- confounding every dire prediction when a change took place. Unfortunately none of the Doctor's human companions have ever achieved the same definition as the man himself -- although Louise Jameison certainly gave new meaning to the term 'body language' as the savage Leila. His mechanical companion is, however, a different matter -- the insufferably omniscient mechanical dog, K9. The parallels with Spock in *Star Trek* are horribly clear. Both represent 'pure' empirical science. Both are subhuman, essentially comic creations that defuse the threat posed by science to us ordinary mortals. This thinness of the subsidiary human characters is a weakness of the show. An unkind observer might describe Astra and the rest as plot devices, not characters at all, plot devices to ease the action of a larger than life yet sympathetic hero against larger than life, exotic villains on various Prospero's islands of electronic trickery and philosophical conjecture.

The show does have other weaknesses, although these tend to be the converse's

of its strengths. It has ambitions, and fails, sometimes falling into pretension. Its exterior shooting can be downright embarrassing -- can anyone believe that gravel pit is some alien planet and not somewhere in Essex? Its humour can fall flat on its face, although sometimes it even essays wit rather than broad humour. Sometimes its plastic kit technology works, and sometimes it would not convince a blind man, although this reflects the pressure of limited finance rather than limited imagination, I suspect. For a long time the show has lacked an opponent for the Doctor of anything like equal weight. It has never recovered from the tragic loss of Roger Delgado, the original Master -- very clearly the dark side of the Doctor and thus the most frightening villain of all. If he is ever replaced then I anticipate a renaissance of competitive character drama in the show -- and this is the undeniable strength of British writing and acting.

Plainly *Dr Who* is my kind of show. It is a living, thriving, evolving organism that has taken on a dynamic of its own rather than been created specifically to fill some slot in the schedule. That is why it is still alive and running while competitors have fallen by the wayside. I prefer its somewhat cynical, slightly decadent metropolitanism to the more naive cultural imperialism of, say, *Star Trek* -- but it would be unrealistic to expect either show to be other than it is, the clear product of the forces that shape them.

In any field of activity at least 95% of human endeavour is doomed to mediocrity. The definition of what is mediocre is, of course, essentially subjective, and there is no law stating that what is mediocre now will not transform itself into inspiration in one second's time. Unfortunately for us all the muses are a niggardly crew, and now is the time to consider some of the mediocrities.

Battlestar Galactica is not mediocre. It is dross. From its inception it was a rip-off, yearning for the dollars of the *Star Wars* success. Its premise is feeble, its effects are limited, its characters are thin, its writing is unrelievedly awful, and its plot development has seen it plummet from these dizzy heights. When something is rotten at its core then no amount of white-wash on the sepulchre walls can cover the stench of corruption. Not that it is without its attractions. Any combination of sound and moving pictures is seductive, but surely there must have been enough talent in Hollywood to make a better fist of it than this. Expectations, you see. The show promised infinitely more than it delivered, and is there any animal more vicious than a fan whose expectations have been scorned?

Into the category of mediocrities verging on dross must go all the shows based on comic heroes: *Batman* (dreadful live and worse in cartoon form), *The Incredible Hulk* (there must have been a sign over the studio gate, "All imaginations to be left here") and *Wonderwoman* (the all-American sex symbol who looks like a Playboy centrefold, impresses Mom because she can cook and Dad because she knows Joe DiMaggio's batting average, and has all the sexual allure of a piece of cod on a fishmonger's slab). *The Six Million Dollar Man* has an interesting central premise, but blows it by poor plotting, heavy overplaying of its limited effects, and acting that... well, hell, I know the guy's supposed to be a robot but I've seen more human animation on a Fiat production line.

With the exception of the live *Batman*, these shows are made with the seamless professionalism of most modern television, and as inoffensive visual and aural wallpaper they are neither better nor worse than thousands of other shows. They fail both as good television and as SF because they are made by people whose only real concern is with filling a slot in the schedules. They have turned to SF conceptions in search of something to spice up the screen for the jaded palate of 'Mr Average Viewer'. We may be wrong to criticise them for not matching our standards, because such standards may be unrealistic, but that is no reason why we should excuse them for failing to match up to their own, horribly modest, standards.

Space 1999 falls very neatly into place as a British version of these shows. The production company has a long history of 'action' shows, and the cast is largely drawn from their repertory. I believe that the company did the best they could, as well as trying to cash in on some nascent SF boom and tickle tired appetites. Unfortunately for them (and us) the show is completely earth-bound, and for a pithy critical comment I can do no better than to refer to Jim Barker's cartoon on page 185 of the International SF Yearbook, in which an irate character wearing a *Space 1999* tee-shirt complains: "All right, I like *Space 1999*. But just because Star Trek fans are called 'Trekkies' that's no reason to call me a 'Ninnie'." A tired little show that strutted and fretted its hour upon the stage and now is seen no more.

The precursors of *Space 1999* are Gerry and Sylvia Anderson's *Thunderbirds*, *Captain Scarlet* and *Joe 90*, in which the Andersons anticipated the wooden acting to come and cut out the middle man by carving their own right from the start. Today the production values of these shows seem quaint, laughable, but within their own context they are successful. As puppet shows they are made with an enthusiasm and wild imagination that is impossible in human shows. If they disappoint it is because that enthusiasm was so quickly exhausted. In truth the audience -- kids -- left the Andersons behind, growing up too soon, becoming the slickly cynical brats we see today. These shows have been followed by a series of ITV children's SF shows of greater or lesser merit, almost all of them doing what the Andersons never did -- condescend to their audience.

If those SF shows designed to fill a scheduling slot have been disappointing, then so have been televisual attempts to translate good SF from other media to the box. Top of this list must be *Brave New World* and *The Martian Chronicles*. *Brave New World* is a miserable attempt to recreate something that was pretty naive in the first place and has long since been passed by the awfulness of reality. It is an attempt to cash in on the cachet of a name that is of much greater significance than the book it surrounds. The show is pretty, but pretty dreadful, and the creators ought to be castrated for the abortion they made of the ending. *The Martian Chronicles*, on the other hand, is good television in that it is well produced and acted, and acceptably visualised. Its failure lies in the assumption that Bradbury can be translated onto television. Bradbury is a great writer. It requires a great film maker to translate great writing. Given the constraints upon television it is improbable that such a film maker has ever worked in television, much less that he might be available at the time, even less that he would be chosen. It is a brave try, but doomed in its inception.

There was a terrible inevitability that *The Hitch Hiker's Guide To The Galaxy* would be made for television. It was a monstrous success on BBC radio, and not only among SFers (it is being repeated yet again as I write this). It fell into the hands of Ken Campbell for a stage production by the Science Fiction Theatre of Liverpool (perpetrators of *Illuminatus* and *The Warp*). We bought the book, heard the record and ate the burgher... and then... and then... along came Jones. Peter Jones, actually, playing The Book, and Simon Jones playing Arthur Dent, not to mention Mark Wing-Davey and others. What there is of the show is good, well visualised and interesting. The trouble is that there is not very much of it. The radio show was characterised by a non-stop flow of ideas that were vomited up and promptly forgotten in the rush. For whatever reason (money, I expect) the television show seems to concentrate on one or two ideas per episode, thereby showing that they aren't such great ideas in the first place. The show is on a straight line of development from the Dadaists, through the Goons, the Fringe and Monty Python. Whatever else can be said about these artists one thing is certain. They do not bear repeated or close scrutiny (except by ardent fans). If we had not been led to expect so much by the radio show then perhaps the television show would not seem so disappointing. You see, dem ole demon expectations again! (And will someone please tell me why we didn't get to see the total perception vortex?)

Expectations of another sort were raised by the resurrection of *Quatermass*, with John Mills as the world saving professor. The original *Quatermass* belonged to a more innocent age of London fogs, *Journey Into Space*, mad scientists, George Dixon and aeroplanes that could not fly because they had no propellers. Joe Louis and Muhammed Ali could not come back, and the professor ought to have been left to moulder in the grave of our memories.

Another series that attempted to spin off from a movie is *Logan's Run*. The serial structure (degenerating into a series) militates against any understanding by the audience of the central premise -- not that a fascist youth culture of sybarites is anything new or difficult in SF terms -- and any non-SF tuning in for the third or fourth episode would probably watch for the Jenny Agutter substitute rather than for anything in the plot. Not that there is anything in the plot for them to watch. Screwing the last dollar from an investment is understandable, but it is not a motive likely to create good, let alone great, television.

One of the basic reasons why translations of media have not been successful -- by and large -- is that creators of SF have not yet come to terms with television. One attempt by a television writer of quality to come to terms with SF is Wilfred Greatorex's *1990*, a sociological fantasy with its head and feet firmly in today. The cast is strong, led by Edward Woodward, but that does not prevent the show falling flat on its face between two stools. It attempts to avoid the technology pitfall -- i.e. ludicrous hardware -- by pretending that 1990 is 1979. This does not convince. Neither do the socio-political developments upon which the show is based -- at least, not then. Today we might be more inclined to accept it. It is an honourable failure, honourable because it is honest, failure because its creators do not understand the SF genre they wish to adopt.

Kit Pedlar and Gerry Davis, creators of *Doomwatch*, know SF as well as they know television. A scientist and a media pro, they cut their teeth on *Dr Who* and other series -- including Davis's involvement in that elephants' graveyard, a fictional sports series. *Doomwatch* is probably the closest television has come to 'hard' SF. The ideas are all lifted directly from potential threats posed by technology. Occasionally it falls into farce -- one episode with 'superrat' is funnier than most comedy shows -- but it is quite prepared to belt its audience with both fists. The romantic Robert Powell is written out of the series in a small nuclear explosion! For all its faults it is a strong show, and one that knew when to bow out before it became boring. There is a need for such a science and ecology show today, but whether the BBC would have the balls to transmit it is very much open to question. Their attitude towards anything that questions the value of all new technology (at least on the popular channel) is evidenced by the knee-jerk journalism of *Tomorrow's World*, which has all the hard edged questioning scepticism of milk pudding.

A descendant of *Doomwatch* is *Blake's 7*, a space opera that has all the operatic cliches of archetypes and bravura effects. Black is blacker than the dark side of Pluto's moon and white comes riding over the hill with a lady's favour tied to the business end of his lance. At least, that was how it started, before the actors started trying to create characters. It takes the recurrent SF motif of an odyssey and peoples it with characters whose political criminality is matched by their actual criminality (I mean, damn it all, this is the BBC; you can't go calling these terrorists 'guerillas' or 'freedom fighters'. Can you?) and then sends them off to save the universe. To this end they are given the space equivalent of the Bismark (a gift from some alien benefactors) and two computers so anthropomorphised that they display more humanity than most of the characters. The loss of the spaceship *Liberator* and the computer *Zen* -- never make a symbolic point with a rapier when a bludgeon lies to hand -- at the end of the third series marks an inevitable cusp in the development of the show. The loss of the character Blake, played with a statuesque questioning

solidity by Gareth Thomas, disoriented the show some time before that point, however. At the end of the second series they had achieved their aim -- destruction of Star One -- only to find themselves facing an alien invasion. This left the writers with any number of options, one of which turned out to be the elimination of Blake (when the RSC beckons every British actor answers the call). With his loss the other characters were left to roam the universe with no other motive than survival. Without a core of dramatic development the show becomes picaresque, and goes off the rails. While some of the episodes are interesting, and the cast do explore more sophisticated motivations (sex, money, sex, power, more sex) the show goes nowhere. The fire haddid.

Any study of series drama shows the difficulties of maintaining the interest of the programme makers for more than two series. With the exception of *Dr Who* it appears impossible to find enough in the characters to make their adventures natural, vital, compelling. The third series of *Blake's 7* demonstrates increasing reliance on motifs and pedestrian set-piece confrontations, even a trend towards the parody that is rampant in the later Tom Baker *Dr Who* shows, most particularly in the characters of Avon and Villa. Such cynical self-awareness is fatal to a show based upon such an innocent central premise as *Blake's 7*.

The central premise of *Sapphire And Steel* combines SF, fantasy and pseudo-mysticism in a mixture requiring the suspension of every critical faculty before the taste comes through. The show is basically of the 'horror from beyond' breed, and that it has sometimes transcended its conception is a tribute to the programme makers. Again we see traces of the 'young lionism' that has enlivened *Dr Who*. The initial concept was purely commercial, as is shown by the central casting -- Joanna Lumley, who looks good, tastes good, and... and David McCallum, an actor of such facial expression that he makes Tyrone Power seem positively animated. They are both refugees from 'action' series that employ SFy ideas and plot tricks, even though Lumley's *The New Avengers* is a pale imitation of the original, and McCallum's *Man From UNCLE* is bizarre by anybody's standards. They are both medium sized, bankable, box office names that should sell the show worldwide. Perhaps the actors' fees explain the very limited effects of the show, although it is probably a reflection of the essentially 'mystery' rather than SF nature of the animal. The main impetus of the show is derived from the plot rather than extraneous trickery. There are those who consider drama a dirty word in SF, almost on a par with characterisation. It is, though, an inescapable fact that plot and character are of paramount importance in television drama. The television audience has expectations firmly rooted in thirty years of character based drama, itself growing out of centuries of naturalistic stage drama. *Sapphire And Steel* is not the greatest show ever, but it is important to television SF because it demonstrates a clear grasp of the nature of television. As such it may be significant in the development of television SF. After all, you need not like something to learn from it.

If *Battlestar Galactica* rips off *Star Wars*, Glen Larsen's latest attempt to get a return on his investment, *Buck Rogers In The 25th Century* rips off *Star Trek*, especially in the latest 'Searcher' series. Maybe no one splits any infinitives over the titles, but the message is clear -- their mission is to search out strange new life... which means that Buck is sure as hell going to find it!

In many ways *Buck Rogers* is as sickly as *Battlestar Galactica*. Some episodes would bring a blush to the makers of the old *Flash Gordon* series. Why is the world ruled from New Chicago (where did I hear that name before)? What sort of world is run by an unworlly scientist and a skinny ash-blond colonel in a catsuit unzipped to a very decorous level? SF may be essentially innocent, but surely there are limits! Why not get a real Wagnerian princess to play the heir to that unspecified galactic empire? That would really hammer home the Wagnerian symbolism of her character, Wagner being the patron saint of

Nazis, who lost the last war America won. Yet again the machines are jokes, defusing their scientific powers. No matter what the threat, it is bound to be good ole cracker barrel Buck who saves civilisation as we know it.

In some ways, though, good ole Buck is an unexpected strength. If Christopher Reeve is not available Gil Gerard is an adequate substitute, even if the script does call on him to make Doc Savage seem as though Sir Lawrence Olivier were playing him. There is a human being beneath that beefcake, and an actor more than willing to bring humanity and subtlety to his part when he gets the chance. It is at these moments that the show comes alive, becomes more than just an action show on an alien range. In those moments the show succeeds as good drama first, and as SF very much second. Which brings us back to the inescapable conclusion that if television SF is good, it is good as television first and only subsequently as SF.

There we have the basis. What comes next is putting some good SF on television, because I cannot say that any of the shows I have mentioned have been very good SF. The reasons are those rehearsed in the introduction, allied to the fact that good SF writers have found it very hard to break into television, and once there appear to have found the world not at all to their liking. Is that any reason to leave television to the Glen A Larsens of this world? Only the writers can answer that.

The situation will not change overnight. To Joe Public, SF is *Star Trek*. It will need more than the migration of Brian Aldiss up the cultural snobbery ladder to wear away generations of fear and loathing in the hearts of the cultural elite of anything with science in the title. What can be done in the meantime? We can gather some cultural brownie points by creating a body of serious criticism -- it is not enough to say "Han Solo is hunky". We have to say why, with at least four footnotes per page. Television as a whole has not generated such a body of criticism. Clive James is good, but he is hardly an academic. We can get in on the ground floor of this. We need not wait a couple of centuries for respectability.

What possibilities are there for those of us who are unfortunate to find themselves writing SF? In the U.K. we are about to see Channel 4, plus cable television, plus satellite television. That means there is going to be a lot more airtime to fill, and that is hard work. Television companies are not eager for material, they are desperate -- and it shows! With the multiplicity of producers we will see, we are bound to find some who are more amenable to SF. After all, it has a lot to say and can even be exciting (so I am reliably informed). The new channels can't be all chat shows and old movies, can they?

Then there is the second leg of the development. Television equipment grows more flexible by the day -- smaller, lighter, more adaptable. The electronic techniques are fast and relatively cheap. Television is increasingly an electronic rather than a celluloid medium, and this should help to counter the expense of so much SF. SF is about imagination and adaptability. This equipment is crying out for the SF touch.

What conclusions are there? First, there has been quite a lot of SF on British television. Secondly, most of it has been bad. Thirdly, it has been bad because it has been bad television. Fourthly, it hasn't been good SF very often. Fifthly, there are substantial obstacles in the way of getting good SF on television. Sixthly, just because we have not had much good television SF in the past does not mean we can't have good television SF in the future.

"It is one of the delightful idiocies of Earth civilisation that it is commonly thought the great gifts of talent are given only to neurotics."

"I've heard that."

"It was an idea started by the neurotics themselves, and fostered by others who did not understand talents that were beyond them."

STANDPOINT

SURVIVAL OF AN ENDANGERED SPECIES:

science fiction and the post-literate society

Mary Gentle

Why are there so few good SF books?

Because what's good is rarely pure 'science fiction'. The simple answer is that SF is a genre like any other, and not a unique form of literature. Like romance, crime and westerns, SF is subject to the limitations of formula fiction; the formula being that a reader knows what he or she has enjoyed in previous books, and expects to buy more of the same. The true representation of SF *per se* is something like Niven's *Ringworld Engineers* -- plenty of hard science, breath-taking if gimmicky concepts, and very little human (or indeed alien) interest. This is the inheritance of what is (in the USA at least) the bastard child of the pulp magazines.

Therefore the usual state of SF -- so accurately portrayed by Joseph Nicholas (in "The Shape Of Things To Come" - *Vector* 101) as being non-literary, right wing and escapist -- neither can nor should be reformed. Let the undiscerning readers have their bubblegum books, let the 'Old Guard' publishers and editors retreat behind the fortifications of outdated credos; the search for a critical standard must begin outside the ghetto walls.

And yet, though they're few in number, there are books published as SF that have all the literary qualities associated with mainstream and other worthwhile fiction. Consider Le Guin's *The Dispossessed*, a seamless blend of science, politics and human relationships that transcends the category of science fiction. The mark of any good book is that it transcends its genre. (Joseph Nicholas cites *Guns Of The Timberland* as a western that succeeds in this. I would add, for crime, Janwillem van der Wetering's *The Japanese Corpse*; for the spy story, John Le Carre's *The Honourable Schoolboy*; and possibly James Clavell's *Shogun* as a bestseller/historical novel.) These aren't 'mainstream', but non-classifiable fiction; and much recent SF isn't classifiable as such. Why is this?

It would appear that pulp SF has, like a nest for a strange cuckoo's egg, fostered an entirely new form of fiction. The New Wave (to continue the metaphor) was the cracking of the shell; such works as the recent *SS-GB* by Len Deighton, Sheila MacLeod's *Xanthe And The Robots*, and Doris Lessing's *Shikasta* are the first sight of the new chick. It's going to be a hard time -- but any process of birth inevitably is so -- while this New SF breaks away from its pulp history and begins to be published without labels, simply as fiction. Perhaps the process will be easier in England because the split between mainstream and SF was never so great as in the USA.

It may sound as though I think SF is reintegrating with the mainstream: far from it. 'Mainstream' itself, the novel of character and society, has become so sterile that it's almost certain to die out. Then I think the New SF will totally supersede mainstream fiction.

What shape will this new fiction take? Given the society that we inhabit, it's difficult to write any novel (other than the purely historical) that doesn't bear at least a passing resemblance to SF. This new form will allow the inclusion of other cultures, as well as Western technological civilisation -- something which can already be seen in fantasy, currently borrowing from

every mythology in sight; which must encourage other writers to bring their present day non-Western experiences to bear on their writing. The present division of writers will increase, the better ones graduating to this non-classifiable fiction; and the split in the readership -- between those who want formula and those who want original concepts -- can only grow wider.

However, the split between quality and pulp -- to use two easily recognisable terms -- isn't confined to SF. In all fields of writing the split is between those who see literature as a craft of escapism and entertainment and those who see it as something more -- an art.

It's as well to distinguish here between the attitudes of writers, publishers and readers. Writers can be divided into those who write to make a living, and those who write because it's a compulsion. The former are word-technicians, businessmen, at best entertainers and at worst hacks. The latter are themselves less classifiable, having a vocation for communication by the printed word, using fiction less for escapism and entertainment than for commitment and disturbance. Publishers, of course, are the great categorisers. It's not their business to be concerned with the quality of their commodity, except in so far as it affects selling large quantities of it to the public. As with the current phenomenon of 'hyped' bestsellers, formula and predictability establish a large market. (Though it may be that in SF the bestseller -- as typified by *The Snow Queen* -- is a hedge against the crash following the post-*Star Wars* boom. Publishers want to survive -- and we need them to. SF must be published somehow.) As to the readership, I leave it to your personal experience. Some books are entertainment and nothing else; some books are entertaining and a hell of a lot more. They stay with you, affect your way of thinking, maybe your way of life. When that happens some good writer has got through the barrier of publishers (and critics) and reached the reader.

There remains a more disturbing view.

All discussion of SF, mainstream, genres, and new forms of literature may turn out to be superfluous. If you want to know why, the harbinger is in your home already, and has been for some years; it's been changing the habits of this society and (no surprise) it's the television set. Because of it and similar technology we may be entering now a post-literate society.

It's possible to claim that we'll always use the printed word, no matter if telephone and cassette take over from letters, TV from newspapers, and computer terminals from text books. Of course, that's true, but that printed word will be solely used as an information tool. Not as the language of fiction; that, in book form, may die out completely. Reading for pleasure, as opposed to reading a shopping list or the rules of Scrabble, requires more than a knowledge of the ABC. A child can be taught to read, but if all its education, information and entertainment comes from visual images that child will lose a certain quality of the imagination. To read fiction is to actively participate in the most flexible narrative form ever created. To watch any two dimensional medium of sound and vision is to become a passive and helpless recipient. A reader has time to think, consider, recap and disagree; but the form of TV and associated media precludes those things. Put simply, TV is easier than books. That's why it breeds lazy minds.

Ask yourself, if fiction is to survive into the post-literate age, what kind of fiction should it be?

Pulp literature, of whatever genre, competes with TV's images on their own terms; being unsophisticated, uncomplicated and undemanding. A study of any book-of-the-film (especially those dependent on visual action for their effect, such as *Star Wars* and *Hawk The Slayer*) suggests that in such a competition fiction of the printed variety must inevitably lose.

The only way literature can survive is by offering something unique -- a window on the human psyche, mind-bending concepts, a cast of thousands, impossible worlds -- that no visual medium can provide. The strengths of literature will ensure its survival, if it does survive, not the weakness of formula. And that means -- whether in SF, New SF, mainstream, or whatever -- a literature of quality and high standards: higher than 90% of the books that are being published today.

Or the paperback book will go the same way as cuneiform writing and clay tablets.

CAN WE GAIN NEW AWARENESS
BY DENYING OUR SENSES?

Cy Chauvin

In the title story of John Varley's recent collection *The Persistence Of Vision*, Varley puts forward an unusual approach to the problem of language and communication: his theory in this novella is that by destroying some of our senses we will intensify the power of those remaining, resulting in an emotional and psychological breakthrough.

The story is centred on a society of the blind and deaf, a commune called Keller, which has evolved into a seemingly much more human and caring society than the larger world around it. The inhabitants communicate by touching, and sex becomes another form of touching, another means of communication, and the problems that are associated with it in our society or the protagonist's are lacking. Oddly enough, this seemingly superior society has no native forms of art, no sensuous sculptures or novels told by hand (oddly in my opinion, not Varley's). Perhaps they are so involved in themselves that they have no time for art; or perhaps it is an inadvertent omission by Varley, and not meant to imply anything about the society. (The protagonist is a struggling writer; he would be certain to notice any art form.) The group does have a mystical, communion-like gathering in which they form a circle and encounter the transcendent in a way that is not explained, except that no one with sight or hearing, even the normal children of these people, can experience it -- or understand it.

The protagonist leaves after several months because he feels he cannot fit in this commune. He does find the material for his own art from this experience, and finally becomes a successful novelist. After several years he decides that what he has is not happiness, and so returns to the commune -- only to find that all the original members have left in some mysterious way. Only their children remain -- and they have voluntarily chosen to be blind and deaf: the implication being that this is the only way to achieve the transcendent state that their parents have gained.

The implications of this story seem rather contradictory. Language and communication are not expanded by closing off the very avenues of that communication, by restricting our senses rather than expanding them. In the past, science fiction has tried to show how we might expand our senses, through telepathy, radio telescope communication with other planets, encounters with aliens, or through the use of new drugs. The new perceptions might be baffling -- indeed, often times we cannot understand them at all -- but it is the only way to new knowledge. Varley describes his commune in almost utopian terms, but all his premises are false, with one exception: that touch might bring human beings closer together.

The fact that Varley describes Keller (the commune) in a utopian manner also tends to rob the story of any value it might have in other ways: such as a story of personal crisis. But Varley's unnamed protagonist is only a mouth-piece and camera through which he can describe the commune; sometimes we can

sympathise with his views, but we never care for him the way we do for real characters in fiction.

"The Persistence Of Vision" is not at all what it seems. What is disappointing is that it fooled so many voters of the Nebula and Hugo awards. Do most of these writers and readers really think that by restricting our senses we can achieve a breakthrough in human understanding, or was Varley's story appealing as a sort of 'free sex' fantasy, a wish-dream?

I have one final complaint. The phrase 'the persistence of vision' is used to describe a phenomenon associated with movies. We don't see a 'moving picture' actually, but a series of still pictures rapidly projected which our eyes and mind blend together into a 'moving' picture. Without this phenomenon we would not have films. This phenomenon has nothing to do with Varley's story; it could easily have been called "The Persistence Of Hearing". I presume that it is meant to be poetic (with which I am entirely in sympathy) since it makes no literal sense. But the title does not fit the story.

"What do I do instead of pursuing sex or fame?" writes Colin Wilson. "I attempt to widen my perceptions until I contemplate the whole world." (*Poetry And Mysticism*, p.22) The children of Keller would not agree.

DO THAT WHICH CONSISTS IN TAKING NO
ACTION, AND ORDER WILL PREVAIL

Iain R Byers

BSFA member, thy name is apathy. You sit there, picking your nose, scratching in private places because you cannot scratch in public places, and reading your *Matrices* and *Vectors*, and your *Paperback Infernos* and your *Foci*, and you contribute damn all. The majority stays silent and this makes the vociferous minority really annoyed because it means that they have to do all the work. Were it not for them you would have no publications to read, and so they rant and rave, constantly decrying the lack of response and lambasting you for your indifference. But have any of them tried to understand you? God forbid! Indifference is not a pardonable offence.

As one who has been a member of the BSFA for some two (three? four?) years, and who has for most of that time been content to do nothing more than pay my yearly subscription and receive my mailings, I am going to stand up for this silent majority and attempt to explain just why it is that they -- we -- are silent. I am taking it upon myself to act as attorney for the defence.

First, have all those people who write locs and "Standpoints" and articles, and convention reports and God knows what else, forgotten just exactly what these activities entail? Is it so long since they were apathetic that they have forgotten the reasons for being apathetic? Well, I am about to remind them. How many of you out there have hesitated to reply to something you have read within the BSFA or some fanzine, indeed, have not replied, for the simple reason that you do not possess a soon-to-be-obsolete typewriter? Of course, it is assumed that all BSFA members, if not all SF fans, are would-be authors, and therefore do own such a machine, or at least can get their hands on one. But this is just not the case. "But you do not need a typewriter," I hear the shout. "You can simply write." But the need for letters to be typewritten is either stated or implied, and so you do not write. And even if this were not implied, and handwritten letters were acceptable, in these times when the theme of adult illiteracy is being thrown about all over the place, and when many people have misgivings about the legibility of their writing, it is often the case that one is reluctant to actually write something.

What of motivation? In *Vector* 101, William Bains suggested that distance, both

of time and space, between a reviewer and the reviewed might explain why people become 'more heated', and though I think there may be something in this, I think that it may also work the other way. Just because of the impersonality of an article, just because of the distance involved, and because you may never have met the author of an article or letter that move one to respond, you decide that it is not really worth it. It is not easy to conduct an argument with a time lag of about two months.

But what if you do have a typewriter, or don't but couldn't care less, and you do feel sufficiently motivated to reply to something you have read, even though you do not know the writer, and might even be the best of friends if you did, just what do you have to do? Well, if you have the time, you have actually to write the goddamn thing, and if it's a "Standpoint" or something similar you may feel that you have to rewrite it. You also have to keep length in mind. You're not Chris Priest after all, or some other pro writer who can get away with writing a letter as long as a short story. Once you have written the thing, suitably short, you have to post it. With the cost of postage these days if you are thinking of becoming really active then you might have to take out a bank loan. But if you write the one letter and send it off, you feel hugely satisfied; you are not one of those apathetic people that everybody keeps complaining of. You eagerly await the next mailing, you tear it open, flick quickly through the appropriate publication, and find yourself WARFEd. Disgusted, you hurl the entire contents of the mailing out of the nearest window, having first attempted to flush it down the toilet; then you slit your wrists. Or, if you are particularly thick-skinned, you vow never to write another loc. You still read the complaints about apathy, you get very angry, and when the time comes to renew your membership...

Of course, it is always possible that out of sheer modesty you do not want to become one of those people who always have their names in print, the people who write about anything, no matter how trivial. We all know who they are.

But all this really misses the point. If someone wants to write they will, regardless of obstacles. The real question is whether there is a problem or not. Are people apathetic? *Matrix*, *Vector*, you name it, whatever the zine you will always find someone urging readers to respond, to contribute. Because of this constant cajoling it is impossible to tell whether people are apathetic. If all the complaints about apathy were to cease, would the letters cease? How can we tell why people write, or why they do not? Can members be split into two groups -- the apathetics and the actifans? And if so, then what are the differences between the two groups? Are the actifans all long term members, the apathetics neofans, or what? Are there personality differences between the two groups? Has anyone ever seriously asked him- or herself why people are apathetic? Does anybody care? Until we all start asking and answering questions like these we are never going to solve the problem of apathy. And that supposes that there is a problem and that it is solvable.

Apathy is a social phenomenon, not restricted to the BSFA, and all the indications are that it is not influenced by argument or persuasion. It is a form of behaviour, and in most cases where people have changed from being apathetic to taking an active interest in something it has usually been due to some single event. So for your own sakes stop your vain attempts at converting the apathetic. They are that way because it is in their nature, and they are perfectly entitled to be so.

THE EDITOR STRIKES BACK

Kevin Smith

I don't usually like to respond immediately in print to a "Standpoint" article since this is the readers' column and not mine, but this does seem a suitable place to say why I have solicited, and will continue to solicit, response.

The main reason is not to stir, or shame, the 'apathetic' (as Iain Byers calls them) into doing something they don't want to. Probably they are busy digging the garden, or building home computers, or something like that, instead of writing. Hence the 'apathetic' are not apathetic at all, but active in different ways. Fine! My main reason is to encourage those who are fairly keen, but perhaps lacking in confidence. *Vector* is an open forum for all the members and anyone who has anything to contribute can do so, no matter whether they are big name pros or the newest of neos, no matter whether they have just joined the BSFA or have been members for twenty years. I treat each contribution on its merits, and even Chris Priest's letters can get cut. (He complains but that doesn't stop me.)

I have been shrill in demanding that readers write because when I became editor the *Vector* letter column had been dormant for some time, and if I hadn't said "Write!" no one would have known they could with any chance of publication. I continue to say "Write!" because there are twenty to thirty new readers each issue who need to be told that they can too.

A second reason for soliciting more material is to improve the quality of the magazine. If there is more to choose from, there is a likelihood that there will be more good stuff too. The unfortunate corollary of this is that I will have to reject more. However, you may rest assured that this, too, is decided on merit, and not such things as 'big-nameness', spelling, or whether it is typewritten. (Contrary to Iain's assertion, a typewriter is not an essential for a *Vector* contributor.) And even if your letter or article is not published your name will be mentioned amongst the 'We Also Heard Froms'.

A third reason for wanting letters, at least, from readers is to reassure the editor that someone is actually reading the dratted magazine. Since BSFA publications go out to all members regardless the only other feedback is the renewal rate for subscriptions, the meaning of which is a bit difficult for any single editor to assess. Reader response is about the only reward a fanzine editor wants, or can expect. It also keeps him up to scratch. If no one reads *Vector* anyway, why should I bother even to try to produce a good issue every time? None at all. Sending out forty blank pages with 'Vector' scrawled on the cover would do. But some people do read it, and do care about what is in it -- and I know because they write and tell me. I'd like to know that a few more people read and care about it, that's all.

Of course, if every one of the eight hundred or so members did write in, I'd be horrified at the extra work...

M I S C E L L A N I U M S

ERRATUM: Martyn Taylor's article contains an error. As he informed me too late to correct in the article, and as I should have realised anyway, *Dr Who* began eighteen years ago in 1963, and not 1966. So there's no need to write and tell me.

CONGRATULATIONS to Gregory Benford as winner of the BSFA Award for his novel *Timescape* (Nebula winner, too, but we know which is better); to Thomas Disch for *The Brave Little Toaster*; to *The Hitch Hiker's Guide To The Galaxy* (second radio series); and to best artist Peter Jones.

Now is the time to start thinking about next year's Awards.

"We landed on a sun," he said slowly.

"A sun? ...But why?"

"Probably for safety. What kind of being could come through this heat without a lot of preparation?"

"The dome must be a perfect insulator."

"Either that, or they use the heat for refrigeration."

Book Reviews

Reviews Editor:
Joseph Nicholas



John Griffiths -- *THREE TOMORROWS: AMERICAN, BRITISH AND SOVIET SCIENCE FICTION*
(MacMillan, 217pp, £3.95)

Patrick Parrinder -- *SCIENCE FICTION: ITS CRITICISM AND TEACHING* (Methuen,
166pp, £2.75)

Reviewed by David Murray

The common sense picture of the way scientists work is that they enter their field of investigation, collect facts, and allow a theory to emerge from the assembled data. Much of the work in the philosophy of science over the past half century has been directed against this, showing that the notion of a theory-free approach to investigation is false and that the real issue is whether the investigator's theories are explicitly articulated or whether they remain as conceptual habits and prejudices. If the latter, then the result of his investigations will of course be virtually useless. It is the single and sole merit of Griffiths' book that it painfully illustrates the results of such scrabbling -- in this case in the field of SF.

For any survey, study or theory to be serious it must have a purpose -- to counter another theory, to solve a problem, to have an educative or persuasive effect. A central fault of *Three Tomorrows* is that it has no such aim; the basis for the selection of its data is obscure (Griffiths states that "random selection and personal whim, if exercised in sufficient quantity, are statistically as likely to produce a typical cross-section of the genre as any more calculated system of selection", p.3) and it conveys no sense of why or for whom it was written. It does not lead the reader into any appreciation of the problems or issues and does not point beyond itself to an orientation in the field of either the literature, its criticism or theories of literary criticism.

Griffiths's posture is arrogant and self-righteous. He begins with an attack on the self-enclosed jargon in which he claims some SF criticism is written, picking up on J G Ballard's 'lumpen intelligentsia', whom he notes are "scurrying energetically about, bleating strange noises" (p.2), but giving only one example: Pauline Jones's review of Le Clezio's *The Giants in Foundation* 11/12, which may indeed be an example of confused thinking and writing, but is nowhere near enough to sustain his wholesale condemnation of 'academicism' in SF criticism. With Griffiths, however, mocking of the literary style of some theory is a dishonest substitute for an attack on the theory itself... because that, of course, would itself be a work of theory.

Insofar as he does have a theoretical basis for his approach, it is a melange of elements from Karl Mannheim's study of the sociology of conformist and critical world-views, *Ideology And Utopia*, Thomas Kuhn's theory of the conceptual practices of science in *The Structure Of Scientific Revolutions*, and the mysticism of Robert Pirsig's *Zen And The Art Of Motorcycle Maintenance*. But his use of these works is complacent, especially his failure to recognise that the first two arise from specific philosophic traditions, are responses to particular problems and issues, and are the centres of controversies. The conclusions he draws from them are frequently platitudinous and inaccurate -- he tells us, for example, that "it is not now necessary to argue the existence of a relationship between literature in general and social attitudes in general" (p.5), but then, when was it ever necessary to argue this? He follows this with the claim that "ever since Professor Karl Mannheim's illuminating demonstration of their interdependence it has been axiomatic that thought -- or rather its verbal expression -- can best be understood in its social context" (p.5).

Mannheim was certainly not the first to advance this position; it was central to the school of ideologues of the French Revolution whose project was for a 'science of ideas' to uncover the implicit biases behind unreflective thought. Taken over by Marx, it was transformed by the insight that systems of ideas could either merely duplicate in thought the social structures they supposedly examined, or could uncover the real mechanisms which underlay the distorting surface. Further, it is in the interests of a ruling class that its oppression be disguised, so its world-view is obfuscatory; but the interest of a subject class is to expose the reality of its subjection, so its world-view is one of discovery. Mannheim diffused this radicalism by arguing that the world-views of both bourgeoisie and proletariat were symmetrically one-sided, and that the privileged social platform for correct comprehension was that of the uncommitted intellectual -- the 'freefloating intelligentsia'.

Griffiths simply takes Mannheim's 'freefloating' doctrine as given and proceeds to discuss the social content of SF as if all views, even mutually inconsistent ones, were equally valid. This prevents him from making comparative judgements of the literary value of, especially, utopian works -- because if he did then the question would arise as to which world-views nurtured works which were bad in particular ways. It is important that we have a perspective which allows for evaluations of aesthetic worth, and through them to political positions, otherwise we can make no sense of the overwhelmingly obvious features of the utopias of Asimov (*Foundation*, *The Stars Like Dust*), Heinlein (*Beyond This Horizon*, *Double Star*, *Starship Troopers*) and Ayn Rand (*We The Living*, *Atlas Shrugged*) -- that, first, the characters of any one group are virtually interchangeable amongst themselves; secondly, we know from someone's personality whether they will be a good guy or a bad guy; thirdly, the bad guys are invariably portrayed as repulsive, incompetent and dishonest; and, fourthly, the bad guys' ideas are so incoherent and shallow it's impossible to comprehend why anyone should believe them. Such novels are structured around the assumptions of extreme liberal capitalism, Darwinism and the American Way of Life, and all express opposition to a nebulous but threatening and absurd thing called 'collectivism'. A serious treatment of utopias as social products must ask why this is so, why these writers are incapable of evoking genuine persons, why these protagonists of science and rationality cannot comprehend another world-view;

but Griffiths does not ask these questions and his criticism, in fact, shares the one-sidedness of the above authors. He claims that the "Foundation" trilogy "might find favour with the orthodox communist" (p.108), that Heinlein "deals consistently and convincingly with the relationships between the sexes" (p.172) and misunderstands Marxism to the extent of confidently claiming that its "logical outcome (is) men becoming merged into a single collective intelligence" (p.145).

But even these absurdities come as a welcome relief from his turgid hoppings from story to story (his third chapter, "The Evolution Of Science Fiction", is so choked with names and dates and titles that, apart from reminding one of Sam Moskowitz's similar work, it is sometimes almost impossible to unravel the argument of his evolutionary schema), obscure footnotes (identifying a quotation on page 107, "22. Frederick (sic) Brown, 'Earthmen Bearing Gifts', in *Seventh Galaxy Reader* (Pan, 1967). This passage bears a very close relation to the account of Martian life in A Bogdanov's *Red Star* (1908). Lenin was highly critical of Bogdanov's work. He gave up writing SF in 1926 to concentrate on his scientific research."), unsupported claims about society ("The enjoyable bawdiness of Chaucer or Rabelais... the total freedom of sexual expression in the mid-twentieth century novel, only reflect the changing impact of venereal disease from its first appearance in the fifteenth century", p.56), and blatant inaccuracies (on page 95, for example, he credits the plot of C M Kornbluth's "The Marching Morons" to the same author's "The Little Black Bag"). His refusal to approach SF through an explicit and coherent perspective leads him into endless arbitrary and pointless categorisations. Having distinguished eight sorts of SF, he then remarks that in each of these categories "in which genuine SF stories may be found the majority do not meet my definition of the genre" (p.12) -- his definition appearing later as a story "in which the suspension of disbelief depends on the plausible development of a central technical idea or ideas" (p.25). It would be hard to think of a more witless exercise than to advance a definition of SF (or of anything else, for that matter) and then admit that most of the instances of the category violated the proposed definition. But as an example of his judgement, and as a warning of the dangers of taxonomy for its own sake, here is his list:

"I would say that in the prophetic category Heinlein's *Stranger In A Strange Land* is SF and that Wells's *The Shape Of Things To Come* is not; the premise in Vonnegut's *Cat's Cradle*, that a single substance could have a chain reaction changing everything to ice, makes it science fiction, while that in *The Picture Of Dorian Gray* does not; the exploits of *Dr Who* are SF, those of *Superman* are not; *Canticle For Leibowitz* or *Dune* is metafiction, *The Scientist's Book Of Dianetics* is not; Bradbury's *The Day It Rained Forever* is SF fantasy, Mervyn Peake's *Titus Groan* is just fantasy; Boyle's *The Black Cloud*, or any one of a multitude of Russian science fiction stories, is instructional SF, *Robinson Crusoe* is not; Asimov's *Foundation* trilogy is speculative SF, and Plato's *Republic* is not; *1984* or *Player Piano* are SF satires and *The Battle Of The Books* is not." (p.26)

If, for Griffiths, the "Foundation" trilogy qualifies as 'speculative SF' rather than 'adventure' because of its idea of psychohistory as the study of the statistical determination of human history, then the works of Zola are also classifiable as SF because they presuppose the genetic and environmental determinism of individuals.

The one point at which Patrick Parrinder's *Science Fiction: Its Criticism And Teaching* approaches *Three Tomorrows* is in its treatment of science. This comparison is not meant to imply that the books are of commensurable value, for they are not in the same class. *Three Tomorrows* is just consistently dreadful, while Parrinder's volume has only particular weaknesses. (It is, I should mention, a contribution to the series on critical aesthetic theories, *New Accents*, conveying the sense that there is a continuing debate about the issues it touches and providing references and annotated bibliographies to help the

readers situate themselves in these debates.)

In his discussion of literary theories, Parrinder rarely commits himself to any one perspective and frequently offers judicious "on the one hand... and on the other hand" balancings. However, he does seem to firmly support the view that:

"Scientific 'truths' -- above all in their reliance on general concepts such as those of man, space, time, and nature -- are now seen to be inherently anthropomorphic and subject to revision. The supposed objectivity of laws and theories has been challenged by the realisation that they invariably reflect, at some level, the structures of thought and social relationships in the societies which produce them."
(p.85)

It is quite wrong of Parrinder to present this view as though it were uncontroversial, and not mention its origin in *Radical Science Journal*, a periodical for critical Marxist analysis of science. He offers little argument to support this view beyond a rather obvious instance of the manifestation of political interests in SF -- "the actual US/USSR space-race was a form of sublimated imperialism" (p.85) -- and then inflates the significance of the example to cover the claim that all conceptual categories are constituted by socio-political relations. The trouble with this view, as with Griffiths's flaccid use of the notion of ideology, is that it becomes impossible to choose between competing and incompatible explanations of social events; despite which Parrinder claims that "SF must be seen as one among the many products of the later stages of capitalism, or of Western imperialism, or of industrialisation" (p.32), although these terms and the theoretical loads they carry are by no means synonymous.

In contrast to Griffiths, Parrinder does not offer his own facile definition of SF; rather, he makes the point that it is a highly self-conscious genre and that attempted definitions of it are "a small, parasitic sub-genre in themselves" (p.2). He discusses other aspects of this self-consciousness in various contexts (his book might have been structurally stronger had it been organised around this notion), one of them being fandom, considered in relation to the question as to why SF, but not other modes of popular fiction, has generated such a phenomenon.

The roots of fandom, he argues, lie in the fact that SF, unlike Westerns, crime stories or 'romantic' fiction, is founded upon, expresses and promotes a view of the world "towards which the rest of society is felt to be significantly hostile or indifferent" (p.36). But instead of describing this subversive world-view, he goes on to point out that SF fans are not especially radical in their cultural, economic, political or sexual values, and to suggest that in addition to its liberating function, SF also serves as a safety valve, a domesticated opera house of fantasy "that sublimates the anxieties of those who fear the impermanence of the status quo" (p.37). The tension between subversion and conformity in SF is crucial to understanding its appeal but, presented as baldly as this, Parrinder can be accused of having his argument both ways: that it appeals to radicals because it articulates their fantasies, and to conformists because it domesticates them. To avoid this charge requires a finely textured analysis of SF's key works so as to demonstrate that its tension of subversion and conformity is not a mistake, an inconsistency, but is determinant of the genre.

Parrinder distinguishes SF from other popular genres on the grounds that the latter are fundamentally nostalgic forms: the individual sleuth arose in fiction as real police forces became collectivised, the Western arose after the frontier had dissolved. SF is supposedly different because it is concerned with "alternative possibilities" (p.xv) -- yet, surely, many SF motifs are deeply nostalgic: Heinlein's Reaganite heroes, fighting dull collectivism and propagating their superior genes; Anderson's and Niven's interstellar empires, traders and

navies; Simak's universe as the 'Big Front Yard' of Midwestern America. He is clearly mistaken in thinking that nostalgia can apply only to the past; the kind propagated in SF is the vast expansion of contemporary culture across the galaxy. Parrinder seems aware of this, yet attempts to claim that "While the radicalism of the average SF novel is meagre indeed, it may still be argued that the genre is essentially oriented towards social criticism" (p.72).

The basis of this claim is Darko Suvin's notion of 'cognitive estrangement' (pp.72-76), which holds that SF is cognitive by virtue of its essential connexion to the world-view of science and is estranging through its practice of offering alternatives to contemporary society, distancing the reader from the taking-for-grantedness of the real world. Parrinder's account of this is not at all clear. Turning to one of the references in his discussion, Fredric Jameson's *The Prison House Of Language*, only added to the confusion because here estrangement, distancing, the renewal of perception, is presented as a concept held by its originators to be constitutive of all literature and art. It won't do to render this more specific for SF by the qualification 'cognitive' because, if we take estrangement as being the erosion of belief in "the eternity of the present... the feeling that the things and events among which we live are somehow 'natural', which is to say permanent" (Jameson, p.58), then estrangement itself is necessary for the growth of knowledge, and vice versa. Parrinder's example of this is Galileo's dynamical experiments, which broke with naive common sense observation through the application of mathematical formalism, showing that the penetration beyond appearances to real relations involves the distancing of theory from perception, which thus further blunts the point of the 'cognitive' qualification.

The nature of science has been discussed at some length because it seems to me that a comprehensive analysis of the modes and tensions in SF must come to grips with this question -- after all, if we take the 'science' in SF as referring merely to spaceships, then much of what is characteristic of science will be missed: that it is a term of epistemological approval; that it stands implicitly or explicitly opposed to other forms of discourse (metaphysics, religion, pseudoscience); that it conveys a particular orientation to the world and experience. It is a fault of both these works that they do not seriously consider this. With Griffiths, this is partly due to his general rambling chattiness; with Parrinder, it perhaps follows from his treatment of SF from the direction of literature-in-general and through the categories developed to deal with the products of a non-scientific world-view. It is interesting to note, however, how both authors devote so much attention to constructing a typology of SF based on given literary categories -- Griffiths's has already been dealt with; Parrinder's divides the material into romance, fable and epic. The motivation for both, I suspect, was to find an organising principle for a work intended as a kind of textbook, but a textbook is only possible as a condensation and presentation, for apprentices, of a ramified and detailed corpus of beliefs which exists outside it and to which it is an introduction. But no such consensus exists about SF, and a textbook on it must hence find an ersatz order -- the nearest to hand being that provided by conventional literary criticism.

In conclusion: Griffiths's book has nothing of interest in it and should be avoided like a Rigellian hot-shot; Parrinder's has much stimulating and thought-provoking detail and is at times exciting, but the organisation of his material is unhelpful and clumsy and is, overall, generally uninspiring. A far better book on SF is the collection he edited for Longmans, *Science Fiction: A Critical Guide*; and it is significant that this is a work by several authors, each taking a particular field without attempting an overview.

"You make me ill!" Volmik said harshly and uttered the most insulting statement known to Alphirkians: "You make my guts tired."

Michael J Tolley & Kirpal Singh (Eds.) -- THE STELLAR GAUGE (Norstrilia Press,
288pp, A\$14.95)
Charles Platt -- WHO WRITES SCIENCE FICTION? (Savoy Books, 313pp, £1.75)
Reviewed by Joseph Nicholas

In my more cynical moments, I'm sometimes prone to think of SF criticism as the new growth industry, such has been the vast outpouring of material over the past few years; and, just as it long ago became no longer possible for any one person to read all the SF published in any given year, so the time when it becomes impossible to read all the SF criticism published in any given year must be fast approaching. Nor, I suspect, would one really need to, given that in many cases there's likely to be some overlap between the works in question, especially since the bulk of them have a tendency to treat the literature as some vast, indivisible whole, acknowledging its authors only as contributors to it and neglecting to consider them as individuals -- as writers akin to other writers, with their own styles and preoccupations. Which makes these two books very welcome, inasmuch as they go some way towards redressing this imbalance, *The Stellar Gauge* via its collection of a number of papers devoted to discussion of the authors' works, attempting to draw out and analyse their main themes and tropes, and *Who Writes Science Fiction?* via its collections of interviews with the authors, attempting to discover something about their personalities and the influences on their lives which moulded them as they are. Neither book is wholly successful in its intended aim; but to take them in order...

For a book ostensibly devoted to analyses of authors' works, it comes as something of a surprise to open *The Stellar Gauge* and find that it begins with David Ketterer's "Fathoming 20,000 Leagues Under The Sea", an essay devoted to but one book in its chosen author's oeuvre. Fascinating though its search for the 'code' with which to explain the underlying meaning of the eponymous novel is, it can't help but exist in something of a vacuum, in the first place because it is too specific, providing the reader with no real guide as to how the code may be applied to Verne's other novels, and in the second place because the works of the earlier French critics from whose general theoretical explanation of his novels Ketterer's quest stems have not been translated into English. Much the same strictures apply to David Lake's "White Death And Albino Griffin: Images Of Death In The Scientific Romances Of H G Wells", with far too much space being devoted to *The Invisible Man* and not enough to his other works. To be fair, Lake's purpose is to argue that *The Invisible Man* is an unjustly overlooked work and in fact provides the key to an understanding of all Wells's scientific romances; but such an argument is not best presented when it shuffles off *The Island Of Dr Moreau*, *The Time Machine* and *The War Of The Worlds* (to name but a few) in only a few pages. Both essays are in any case too short (18 pages for Ketterer's and 16 for Lake's) to do full justice to their subjects, although -- as with their overconcentration on individual books -- both authors might have felt constrained by the fact that their subjects have already spawned a large amount of critical work and that further generalised surveys would have been superfluous; in which case, one is forced to wonder, why were the essays included at all?

Be that as it may, they are in any case preferable to some of the others. David Sless's "Arthur C Clarke", for example, concentrates on clobbering him for his naive, schoolboyish pro-technological enthusiasm and consequent amoral indifference to its effects on man; cathartic stuff, to be sure, but not very enlightening about his work. Christopher Priest's "Landscape Artist: The Fiction Of J G Ballard" is actually a reprint of his review of James Goddard's and David Pringle's *J G Ballard: The First Twenty Years* from John and Eve Harvey's *Ghas* 1 and, although good in itself, is both too subjective in its approach (for which Priest apologises in his introduction) and too limited in its scope. Frederick Yuan's "Immortality And Robert Silverberg" concerns itself mainly with a blow-by-blow description of the invented technology of immortality in a mere four of Silverberg's novels, telling us no more than we

already know and contributing nothing to our understanding of his work as a whole; it is, in fact, the worst essay in the book, and a dreadful effort regardless.

Easily the most contentious contribution is George Turner's "Frederik Pohl As A Creator Of Future Societies", and having said as much I should declare some personal bias in that I'm rather partial to Turner's demanding, closely-reasoned and frequently polemical criticism, more often than not agreeing with it and finding it in any case a welcome breath of fresh air in a genre where effective criticism is too often hamstrung by unquestioned received wisdom about 'acknowledged classics' and 'great authors'. This piece, a spirited demolition job on the work of a writer often acclaimed for his skill at extrapolating plausible future societies, which in fact finds them illogical, contradictory or downright ridiculous, is no exception -- but at the same time I must disagree with the premises from which it arises, since they boil down to nothing more than the old John W Campbell line of 'SF as future realism'. Quoting approvingly from Ben Bova's "The Role Of Science Fiction" in Reginald Bretnor's *Science Fiction: Today And Tomorrow* -- "... to describe possible future societies and the problems lurking ahead is not enough. The writer of science fiction ... must show how human beings can and do literally create these worlds" (p.11, emphasis Bova's) -- Turner then proceeds to apply this rubric throughout as though it were gospel, in the process reading out any consideration of SF's symbolic, metaphorical, allegorical and mythopoeic (never mind purely escapist!) functions and in consequence condemning to oblivion something like half its writers. It is, in other words, far too narrow a line to pursue, and Turner's application of it is not helped by his extending it to cover the work of authors other than Pohl -- John Brunner's *Stand On Zanzibar*, *The Jagged Orbit*, *The Sheep Look Up* and *The Shockwave Rider*, for example, are condemned as "... skilfully and shrilly presented collections of possible problems stretched to their imaginative limits ... societies wherein present trends had already passed the point of no return (and) having long passed the disintegration point, could not exist in such extreme forms" (p.131), which criticism ignores Brunner's intention, after the manner of Huxley, Orwell and many others, of prophesying a warning rather than attempting to accurately depict a future.

But enough cavils; there are some good essays in the book, the best being Jane Hipolito's and Willis E McNelly's "The Statement Is The Self: Alfred Bester's Science Fiction", Brian Aldiss's "Blish And The Mathematics Of Knowledge", Bruce Gillespie's "Literature Which Awakens Us: The Science Fiction Of Brian Aldiss", and Michael J Tolley's "Beyond The Enigma: Dick's Questors". Of these four, Aldiss's is the most lucid, his prose being as sublime and as witty as ever; Gillespie's is the most rigorous, exploring each of the author's themes at painstaking length (although it must be said that he owes much to Richard Matthew's earlier *Aldiss Unbound: The Science Fiction Of Brian W Aldiss*; not that he plagiarises it, but that he follows much the same evolutionary course); and those devoted to Bester and Dick are the most detailed. In the former case, this is because its subject has produced little novel-length work and the authors can thus concentrate closely on some of its obscurer or more underplayed aspects -- their textual analysis of the unsignalled interpersonal relationships in *The Demolished Man*, for example, is particularly illuminating --, and in the latter case because, although Dick has written a vast amount, much of it is inferior or minor work and Tolley is thus free to home in on the details of Dick's personal search for God and the nature of evil as revealed in such novels as *Martian Timeslip*, *The Man In The High Castle*, *A Scanner Darkly* and, particularly, *The Three Stigmata Of Palmer Eldritch*; his in-depth textual analysis of the last provides (in contrast to Ketterer's) similar essay on Verne's *20,000 Leagues Under The Sea*) many valuable pointers to the rest of his work. It is, I would argue, the most stimulating and informative essay in the book.

Overall, then, *The Stellar Gauge* is something of a mixed bag, the quality of its contributions ranging from the extremely good (Tolley's) to the poor

(Yuan's), and I only wish that, as one of the few critical volumes on SF to devote itself specifically to studies of particular authors, the quality could have been consistently higher. In their introduction, in fact, the editors admit that it "is not an ideally balanced collection", adding that they had hoped to include some essays on women writers but claiming that it "suggests well the range of qualities and interests among science fiction writers, past and present". It does, but only up to a point; may their next collection (assuming that they have one planned; there is no mention of such) be better.

The lack of women writers, or interviews with them, seems to have been one of the heaviest charges levelled at Charles Platt's *Who Writes Science Fiction?* (published in the USA under the more apposite, and certainly less clumsy, title of *The Dream Makers*), particularly by American critics. I can't agree with them at all -- as Platt points out in his introduction to the joint interview with Damon Knight and Kate Wilhelm, most of the best-known writers are in any case male, he wanted to interview some women writers but they refused, women tend to write fantasy rather than SF, and to include women just because they were women is mere reverse chauvinism and hence no more tolerable than the traditional male variety.

The book cannot be so consistently defended, however. In deciding to transcribe the interviews in line with his subjective reactions to his subjects (the first interview, with Asimov, was done for *Ariel*; in transcribing it for publication there Platt remarks that "... it was foolish to pretend that I myself was not a part of it. Not only did Asimov's perception of my personality bias his responses to some small degree, but my own intelligence filtered the whole experience. And I had a few observations that seemed worthwhile as additional commentary" (p.13)) he inevitably distorts the picture; we, the readers, sometimes receive more insights into Platt's impression of his subjects than into the subjects themselves, and are hence faced with something of an uphill struggle to get back to the source. This is most noticeable in those interviews in which his 'additional commentary' constitutes at least half of the published material; in those where he lets the author talk and adds little himself the picture is clearer. But it is nevertheless ironic that the clearest interview of all, that with Knight and Wilhelm, is the one he could not himself conduct due to petrol rationing's preventing his travelling to meet them, and they instead interviewed each other, being perhaps more revealing in such circumstances than they would have been in his presence.

The remaining interviews -- 27 of them, ranging from Van Vogt to Ballard, Bova to Vonnegut, Dick to Tubb, Farmer to Aldiss, plus profiles of himself and C M Kornbluth -- vary widely in quality. This is very much to be expected -- either Platt or his subject had an off day, or something failed to click between them, or the subject was feeling somehow uncommunicative, or there wasn't enough time, or whatever -- and as a general guide it's safe to assume that the shortest ones are the most dispensable, although all contain their fair share of gossip and anecdotes about the writers' lives. Come to that, the book can be said to thrive on gossip and anecdotes; it is not, after all, a stern critical work intended as the last word on its subjects, but seeks to picture them as thinking, breathing, feeling individuals, warts and all: and in this it is generally successful. May there one day be a second volume.

(As a footnote, I would add that *The Stellar Gauge* could be hard to come by in the U.K. -- I haven't seen any copies in the specialist SF bookshops -- and I'd therefore recommend that you write direct to Norstrilia Press at P O Box 91, Carlton, Victoria 3053, Australia, enclosing all the usual International Reply Coupons.)

"The laboratory covers a dozen floors," the general said, "and in it we have every kind of equipment known. We can produce temperatures of minus 900° Kelvin and we can build up our furnaces to half a billion degrees..."

Those who are not particularly enamoured of fantasy, as I am not, may find the first chapter of *The Shadow Of The Torturer* disconcerting as they wend their way through the traditional paraphernalia of strange names and mysterious meetings loaded with dark significance. Fans of fantasy, on the other hand, may find the rest of the novel disconcerting as they discover that it bears no more than a superficial resemblance to their beloved genre. Both should forget any preconceptions and prejudices.

Every so often a reviewer comes across a book that amply repays all the rubbish he must normally read. Sometimes it is one that turns out much better than expected; sometimes, more rarely, it is one that manages to live up to high expectations. *The Shadow Of The Torturer* belongs in the second category. Wolfe is one of the finest writers in science fiction, and he doesn't let us down.

The art of fine writing lies in the selection of the words: they should so perfectly suit what is being said that they become invisible, leaving nothing between the reader and the ideas expressed and the scenes described by the author. Wolfe fits this ideal more than any other writer I know, the transparency of his prose being such that the pages fly by without one being aware of them. Instead, the reader is leafing his way through gloomy cells, dark corridors and real people. Wolfe breathes life into everything his pen creates.

We are in the far, far future. A society more advanced than ours, one which even reached the stars, has fallen into decline so long before that its decay has achieved a sort of permanence. The capital city, rambling but underpopulated, has at its centre a gloomy mass of towers and hidden courtyards of unknown antiquity: this is the Citadel, where various guilds -- in whose hands lies the disintegrating ordering of society -- make their home. One such is the Guild of Torturers, in whose ranks our protagonist, Severian, is an apprentice. The torturers are a marvellous creation, belonging with the most traditional populace of heroic fantasy yet at the same time apart from it all.

One of the weakest aspects of nearly all heroic fantasy is the rigid code that dictates so many of its characters' way of life. The Torturers, too, are rigidly bound into a certain pattern of life, but in this case one feels that it is a liveable pattern, that people could order their lives in this way and live within such dictates. Their function, inflicting without question punishments decreed by the unseen rulers of the land, could, in lesser hands, have so easily become an exercise in blood and horror; Wolfe makes it just another way of life, a career as unexceptional as any other, its ordinariness underlined by the way its victims are referred to, without irony, as 'clients'. Thus, by a device that other writers would have used to show the barbarism against which such fantasy is normally played out, Wolfe makes an effective point about the civilisation of his world.

Severian breaks the rules of his order, becoming emotionally involved with one of the clients and easing her death. As a punishment, he is banished to become public executioner in a small town to the far north. It must be stressed that Wolfe allows himself no easy options: Severian is not disillusioned with his guild, he does not reflect the reader's moral reaction to the role of Torturer; he remains a Torturer through and through, and this is one of the strengths of this remarkable book.

But, as any character must be, he is changed by his experiences as he ventures out into the world from which he has all his life been sheltered. If the book has been good up to this point, here it becomes even better; his and our journeys of discovery become one and the same. But Wolfe is not prepared to

produce the usual succession of weird and wonderful people and adventures in the belief that such is all we require. Severian does in fact meet strange people and have strange adventures, but they are all, somehow, real, part of the picture of a real world that Wolfe is painting -- yet with three more volumes still to come, neither we nor Severian have learned all there is to know about 'Urth'. Moreover, and particularly impressively, Wolfe takes an impish delight in, apparently quite casually, unsettling our growing image of 'Urth' with a brief but telling reference. For example, for most of the time we accept, without thinking, that the story is set in the northern hemisphere, until Wolfe happens to mention that the snowy wastelands lie to the south and the jungles to the north. Of more moment than this somewhat minor point is the part of the book set in the botanical gardens, which seem to have no spatial limits and which might even cross the borders of time and the grave. And there is more, much more, too much for me to hope that I might do it justice in the space available

To appreciate all this you must go out and buy the book: it is the best literary investment SF has produced for a very long time, right up to the cliffhanger ending and the tongue-in-cheek author's note. Now all I can do is fret away the time until I can lay my hands on the next volume of "The Book Of The New Sun", my usual antipathy towards sequels overcome by the fact that it was all planned in advance, that Wolfe finished writing all four volumes before the first was published, and by the brilliance of this first part. I feel as though I have taken part in Severian's odyssey, as though I know the world through which he travels, and I look forward to resuming the journey.

John Crowley -- *ENGINE SUMMER* (Gollancz, 182pp, £4.95)

Reviewed by Mike Dickinson

In his previous two novels, *The Deep* and *Beasts*, John Crowley revealed an ability, totally beyond that of most SF writers, to depict a convincing and completely alien way of life. In the first book, however, the narrative technique left a coldness at its centre which I found unattractive; a fault he avoids in *Engine Summer*, in which imagination and artistry are perfectly allied. It is certainly, and in keeping with the previous two, no easy read, but Crowley's writing skill and the complexity of his imagination more than compensate.

Its narrator, Rush That Speaks, is first seen growing into adolescence in the town of Little Belaire, erected and settled by the fleeing remnants of the Truthful Speakers, a sort of communal church. Desiring to become a Saint (in this world, a cross between a shaman and a bard), he leaves the town in search of his girlfriend, Once A Day, who departed earlier in the company of some pedlars; wandering, he eventually finds her and, also eventually, becomes a sort of Saint. This bald recital of events, however, tells us less about the book than most such are able to, partially because the quest at its centre is far from the well-mapped linear journey that it usually is. In a Vance quest novel, for instance, we are usually given a fair picture of the protagonist at an early stage in the story, further information coming in convenient packages throughout. The societies encountered may seem weird, but their oddity is usually wholly explicable by one or two key facts; and despite gaps of centuries and light years, the characters' mores and psychological profiles are close enough to ours to be readily comprehensible -- which may be unrealistic but in reading such a book one will experience a self-enclosed story with no loose ends.

Engine Summer is not like this, needing further readings to solve the questions that linger at the back of one's mind -- such as, for example, the exact nature of the catastrophe that produced this world. The post-disaster society of *Beasts* had mutants, which were central to the book and signalled the situation with which the reader was dealing; but here information is acquired obliquely,

and is distorted by the centuries of mythologising which have post-dated the cataclysm -- stories of 'angels' whose wealth and ambition drove them to subdue the Earth, reach out into space and finally cause 'The Storm'. There are stories, also, of the League of Women who stubbornly, passively opposed this vaulting ambition, finding no role for themselves in its hubris and who, after The Storm, held together to rebuild what they could:

"For remember, children, remember: for all that the Women of the League knew better, for all their dark and light, they too were angels themselves. Never forget that, for it is their greatest glory. I have felt them meeting here then, in those days: and I know that whatever skills they had, it was terror, dark and panic they felt; and that whatever they created later, they knew their task just then was mostly to watch angels die." (p.135)

Even when Rush meets the last group of angels, one which escaped to a floating city "half a mile wide at its base, and all transparent" (p.174), there is much left unexplained. It is possible, however, to follow signs and pick up clues, thus deducing much of this and other mysteries which lie at the heart of the book; Crowley is too shrewd to destroy its fascination by having a *deus ex machina* walk in to explain it all. The angels are far from gods.

What will, I suspect, endure longest in the memory is the gallery of characters and scenes created and evoked: Once A Day, whose increasing domination by a need for secrecy warps her life in strange ways; Painted Red, the Little Belaire gossip (wise woman) who manipulates devices in ways their designers never expected to uncover truths and legends in hallucinogenic quests; the semi-telepathic twins Budding and Blooming; the tree-dwelling Saint Blink, who possesses powders which allow virtual hibernation during the winter; the legendary Mother Tom, the transsexual martyr and prophet of the League of Women; and the people of Dr Boots List, roving pedlars dominated by the mind of a cat and their wise-woman Zhinsinura (quoted earlier).

Crowley's prose shows the eye of a poet in small sentences and phrases, as in this description of an abandoned transcontinental highway:

"Around us, and stretching away and behind, Road seemed to glow faintly in the quick-fading light, as though it spent an old radiance of its own." (p.22)

But he is never self-indulgent; he is crystal-clear and very controlled, more so than in his previous works. His style is malleable, the narrative composed of short, brisk sentences after the manner of his protagonist, becoming more oratorical for such as Zhinsinura, and making other changes to suit other speakers. He even manages sly touches of humour; for example, a hallucinogenic infusion Rush takes is called 'confusion' (p.164) because of its effects.

To sum up: *Engine Summer* is quite simply one of the best books I have read, transcending the SF genre's habitual crudeness to demonstrate why SF at its best is a vital part of modern literature.

Kate Wilhelm -- MARGARET AND I (Timescape, 214pp, \$2.50)

Reviewed by Mary Gentle

The central theme of this complex book is identity. Based on the Jungian speculation that the unconscious as well as the conscious may have an ego, the story is told both in the third person, about Margaret, and in the first, by the 'I' of the title, Margaret's subconscious mind.

Margaret takes a holiday to think over her unhappy marriage, occupying a house by the sea that belongs to her husband's aunt, Josie Oliver. Josie has gone abroad after the death of her lover, Paul Tyson, a physicist investigating the nature of time, and Margaret is mistaken for her by Bok and Stein, the men who

want to study Tyson's notebooks. The narrator here is Margaret's unconscious, less limited by space and time, but confined by lack of communication between them. At this point, Margaret's husband Bennett arrives at the house in company with Arnold Greeley, a crooked presidential candidate, and his entourage of wheeler-dealers. Margaret deals with them, juggling her identities as herself and Josie Oliver. This is fairly straightforward: what do the men want with Tyson's work, how will Margaret escape being used by political manipulators?

On this first level, it's all a question of identities: Margaret as Bennett's wife, as Josie Oliver, as Meg Fowler (her maiden name) with John Llewellyn, a doctor of theology who may or may not be Paul Tyson. The second level is religious: an exploration of what happens to the identity after death. Two things lead into it. Margaret and 'I' are involved in several out-of-body experiences, Margaret finding herself in the presence of the dead Paul Tyson, and her unconscious escaping from a 'greyness' to a state where it can create its own heaven and hell. There is also Margaret's concern with her own sexuality -- nonexistent with Bennett, hysterically ecstatic when hypnotised by Stein, and a form of mental union when she's with Tyson's spirit. The house is visited by a ship's crew, college kids led by John Llewellyn. He and they may or may not be real, and her sexual experiences with them may or may not be an hallucination; the question is left open.

The clue here is the doctor of theology. Though never stated, it's apparent that the 'greyness' is death, and the experiences beyond it an interpretation of the afterlife. Bok hopes to find the secret of immortality in Tyson's temporal studies, Tyson himself having retreated from the world to learn to look at time in a totally different way -- more mystic than scientist, it appears, but, as Wilhelm says, at sub-atomic levels linear time ceases to exist, and it's feasible for a scientist to be led in this direction.

Wilhelm is very good at realising characters. She shows how a supposedly intelligent woman like Margaret can become trapped in a loveless marriage, and her relationship with Bennett is very accurately observed. Bennett himself is no black-hatted villain, only a flawed man unable to see anyone as a human being, and not something to be manipulated to serve his appetites and political ambitions. Minor characters are convincing: Bennett's Bostonian relatives, Greeley and his hunger for power, Josie Oliver (in her letters to Tyson). John Llewellyn is perhaps too much the Jane Austen hero to be wholly probable, but he may be nothing more than Margaret's creation, a projection of her/Josie's love for Paul Tyson. Apart, both Margaret and her subconscious are childlike, Margaret obeying the authoritarian Bennett; the unconscious, for all its power to look outside of time, limited by greedy and immature appetites. To paraphrase the Jungian quotation that Wilhelm uses, only when they know and accept each other will Margaret become a whole person. By the end of the book she has become a self-possessed and determined woman who has learned how to say no -- and yes. Not only is there that reconciliation of the self, but she has learned to look past the 'real' world to see what other realities might lie beyond it.

The speculations on the afterlife are interesting, in that they have a scientific rather than an orthodox religious slant. Where they fail to convince, for me, is on the personal level, in Margaret's experiences of what I can only call astral sex -- riding-on-moonbeams and over-the-rainbow scene that smacks less of the union of identities than of the old euphemisms and evasions of the sex act in literature.

But *Margaret And I* cries out to be re-read; not more than half the answers are directly spelled out. Multilayered, concerned with identity, sexuality and religion, it's a book that will outlast many of its contemporaries. As proof of that: after you've read it, look at the copyright date.

Reviewed by Martyn Taylor

Common to many famous artists is the belief that they have something important to say about current social phenomena, whether or not these phenomena fall within their fields of competence and experience. Writers are, of course, especially prone; SF writers even more so, because their traditional concerns are with larger-scaled ideas. Frederik Pohl's stature -- one of SF's elder statesmen, one of the forces that have shaped the genre -- appears to have convinced him that he can step outside its bounds to make his latest 'important statement', and in *The Cool War* he takes as his text that real, sad and frightening vindictive paranoia which scars the psyche of America today. It is an important theme, of significant and immediate relevance to us all, and it merits a sensitive and intelligent treatment -- a treatment which Pohl fails to provide.

If *The Cool War* is SF then the 'S' represents speculation, and not particularly radical speculation at that. In a future not many years hence, the world is caught in an energy crisis that has reduced people to driving hydrogen- and electric-powered cars. (Ecology note: is this a crisis?) Society seems to be falling apart, the conspiracy theory of history is in the ascendant and the people of America seem convinced that it must all be caused by the deliberate action of some malign agency. The hero of the piece is a confused kibbutznik turned trendy Unitarian minister by the name of H Mornswell Hake (hereafter known, as in the book, as 'Horny' -- what else?) who in his youth was a paraplegic until the surgeons got third time lucky. Nonetheless, while at college he joined the R.O.T.C., largely for the sake of better grades. Much to his amazement, the beginning of the story finds his enlistment reactivated by a government agency known simply as 'The Team', a successor to the CIA which spends its time sabotaging other states, and not necessarily hostile states. There are, after all, no allies in the cool war, no friends, just enemies. Those with long memories will recall that destabilisation was one of the real fun ideas to emerge from Washington during the Kissinger years -- Norodom Sihanouk still goes into convulsions at the memory, Salvador Allende positively died laughing at it.

Pohl is perfectly entitled to consider this a suitable topic for the comic approach, however much we potential destabilisees may disagree with it. The demands of this theme are, however, such that it would require the gifts of a Gore Vidal to execute a successful comic novel about it. Whatever else he may be, Pohl is certainly not a Gore Vidal. Fortunately for the sensibilities of non-Americans, however, *The Cool War* runs out of comic steam pretty quickly and thereafter masquerades as a spy thriller. Horny jet-sets from exotic hotel to opulent yacht, permitting Pohl to dazzle us with hardly relevant gobbits of swot erudition passing as local colour. (Cultural note: do Qataris really call a supermarket an 'aipurauq'?) He gets belted, busted, jailed, sprung and laid with all the nonchalance obligatory to any sub-Fleming spy thriller. But Pohl has not mastered the conventions of the spy genre, and merely borrows its plot devices with careless abandon -- the hero unwittingly involved in a situation he does not understand (Desmond Bagley), the all-round duplicity (John Le Carre), the Mata Hari who changes sides because of the irresistible virtue and sexual prowess of the hero (Ian Fleming). The list goes on, culminating in the destruction of the Middle East oil fields by a pre-emptive Israeli nuclear strike. Unfortunately, no amount of borrowed clothing can camouflage the book's lack of the pace, suspense and ingenuity that lie at the core of any successful spy thriller.

After Greene and Le Carre, no one could be convinced by Pohl's 'The Team'. On the one hand, they are totally efficient; on the other, they are so thin on talent that they are forced to recruit Horny especially for one big job. This done, they become so sloppy that their well-laid plans, once he has discovered their evil intent, are easily thwarted by his stumbling (albeit aided by a climactic plot device of stunning arbitrariness). There must be limits to

the suspension of disbelief required in readers, even by SF giants.

Having burdened himself with an unaccustomed genre and devised a plot that is securely hobbled from the start, what manner of fist does Pohl make of writing his story? Well, he has a certain facility -- years of practice do have their effect -- within a vocabulary limited even by the standards of the TV generation, but he regularly so mangles his sentences that I found myself forced to re-read over and over again just to glean his meaning. Syntax may seem like pedantry in the 1980s, but the crafting of prose is just as much an expectation in a writer as the crafting of story, and the prose in *The Cool War* is shoddy. The attempts at alliteration are intrusive, always leaving the rhythm of the piece lying flat on its face. The touch is juvenile, although the subject-matter is adult and we are regaled with 'adult' attitudes and behaviour -- the most stable couple in Horny's congregation are gay, while he himself is pursued by one of the female members of a failing communal marriage. His attitude towards sex is very 'mature': he gets it when he can and worries about it the rest of the time. The fact is that Pohl writes about sex with that smirking schoolboy's masturbatory virginity so beloved of elderly American SF writers, and any intrusion of genuine eroticism -- let alone human love and affection -- is purely accidental. For obvious reasons: love, affection and all that jazz occur between human beings, and the characters in *The Cool War* have all the rounded humanity of stick-men. They are shorthand familiars, stereotypes lifted wholesale from the spy stories Pohl has sought to imitate; there is no room in his story for real people driven by real motivations, enduring real emotions.

The Cool War is not so much a novel as a sermon, a harangue on the state of the American nation, the incoherent pain that clearly disturbs its author. For a while, he does begin to articulate the bewilderment of a people who have come to see themselves surrounded only by enemies, who cannot believe the sincerity of their worried friends. He clearly disapproves of the hard-hat, two-gun, born-again insecurity that elected Ronnie Raygun, but fights shy of any deep analysis. The whole book is shot through with ambivalence -- outwardly he condemns the insanity of 'The Team', but is unable to prevent a breathless, approving envy seeping through. He builds a position, and at the same time undermines it.

Not that the reader should expect anything else. The copyright page warns that "Portions of this novel have appeared in somewhat different format in *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine*" and a happy ending is thus obligatory. Horny foils the bad guys, outwits the wily Orientals and gets the girl who turns out to be a tattooed lady on the side of the angels despite such decadence. The means by which the denouement is achieved demonstrates Pohl's amazing naivete, since the bad guys are scuppered by broadcasting their evil deeds to the world. Are we seriously expected to swallow this? Can anyone believe that in the America of today, or at least the America that Pohl draws, they would not strike medals for 'The Team', whose dirty tricks have been directed to putting one over on the Arabs? It would be a ticker-tape parade on Broadway for them, not jail.

The Cool War is an ambitious book concerned with a very important topic, but the subject-matter overwhelms its author, leaving a novel riddled with the structural defects of more than one genre. Initially, he promises us much, but is quite unable to make the delivery. Despite which, it does have one redeeming virtue -- by the standards of his contemporaries, both SF and mainstream, it is blessedly short.

Walter Tevis -- *MOCKINGBIRD* (Bantam Books, 276pp, \$2.95)

Reviewed by Bill Carlin

Most science fiction, despite varying degrees of complexity and success, is basically of a parabolical nature -- a classic example springing instantly to

mind being "Revolt Of The Pedestrians" in which the last surviving bipeds conspire against souped-up automation by reviving the habit of walking; Frederik Pohl recalls this throw-away allegory with some patronising nostalgia in *Hell's Cartographers*. Apparently the mature, literate audience of today has little taste for candid sermonising so the presentation of such fables has been geared up an intellectual notch or two, though certain authors stagger along the narrow line between embarrassing gaucherie (Ellison at his worst) and soapbox oratory (Heinlein and Pournelle at their most intolerable) with an awkward gait. In the case of this novel, Tevis walks that line surely and steadily to produce a work worthy of praise if only because it succeeds in holding the reader's attention against all the odds.

The plot, viewed in retrospect, is laughably unoriginal. It involves an 'eternal triangle', linking a man, a woman and an 'angst-ridden' robot, set against the background of a society where literature and literacy have died out and the individual lives only for fleeting pleasures. Bentley, the hero of the book, rediscovers the art of reading and soon finds himself sentenced to life imprisonment for his pains. Meanwhile, his robotic antagonist continues with a personal plan to make human life extinct so that he can finally die himself. Naturally Bentley escapes confinement and returns to New York as the new Adam to grant the robot's death wish in the book's climactic scene.

It all sounds very dreary and hackneyed-unto-oblivion, yet Tevis actually manages to make it work. His prose is as simple and straightforward as the allegory he presents, and what emerges at the end is clearly an indictment of American society as seen by the author. Somehow the reader is made to swallow a nasty pill before the meagre coating of sugar is completely dissolved; this is no mean trick because for the palate accustomed to a regular diet of SF the concealed medicine could be doubly gruesome simply for the quantity of clichés used in the formula. Characters are quite often caught in the act of cooking 'synthi-eggs' over 'nuclear stoves' in the middle of scenes, with more than a slight sense of *deja vu*. (Bentley's sojourn among the rugged individuals produced by the penal system reads like a rehash of Heinlein's "Coventry", while in the scenes involving the tortured robot Ellison's torrentially bleeding heart can almost be heard pitter-pattering in the background.) Whether by accident or design, Tevis keeps the element of the ridiculous under control and the novel is never less than readable.

Due chiefly to its sincerity, simplicity and a liberal sousing with traditional SF elements twisted askew, it remains unique among recent contenders for the Nebula award in its category. Personally, I don't consider this to be a great recommendation, since the Nebula is hardly a hallmark of quality, but I would be less than fair if I didn't admit to enjoying the book when first reading it, even though its self-inflicted wounds ultimately make its pleasures transient ones.

Joan D Vinge -- *FIRESHIP & MOTHER AND CHILD* (Sidgwick & Jackson, 191pp, £6.95)
 THE OUTCASTS OF HEAVEN BELT (Sidgwick & Jackson, 198pp, £6.95)

Reviewed by John Hobson

With the current ascendancy of Joan D Vinge, the cycle of feminist-inspired SF triggered off by the afterglow of the 'New Wave' has ended with the female writers becoming, like Orwell's pigs, indistinguishable from their erstwhile oppressors. If these two books are representative of her talent, then she is a very average writer who has received a disproportionate amount of praise; one cannot help but wonder if she would have been similarly lauded had she been male. This is not to suggest that she is a 'bad' writer, rather that she is a writer in the classic SF mould -- lightweight and undemanding, and hence appealing to those of her peers who perpetuate the limitations of the so-called 'Golden Age'.

The more interesting of these two books contains a pair of novellas, "Fireship" and "Mother And Child", both competent works which irritate by being too hastily written. "Fireship" relates the tale of Michael Yarrow, a nondescript technician who volunteered to become a guinea pig for the US government and allow himself to be plugged into a super computer called ETHANAC; since the latter is portable, he becomes host to a composite being, Ethan Ring. Ring escapes from the US labs by shorting out the entire US defence system (by exposing it to Yarrow's insecurity complex) and flees to Mars, which has been converted into a modern Xanadu by a successful capitalist named Khorram Kabir. Ring at first busies himself winning at the casino, but is then rumbled by a group of private dicks who want him to infiltrate Kabir's computer set-up, otherwise they'll return him to the US. Ring eventually tracks the computer down to a monastery in the middle of a Martian desert and finds Kabir in a nicely sprung ending.

It's a slight story, written in that tongue-in-cheek style so beloved of American SF writers, and the humour is hence rather heavy-handed. Vinge unfortunately fails to tackle the potential conflict inherent in Ethan Ring's dual personality, instead taking the easy way out with mental symbiosis -- a pity, because it would have made the story a worthy Hugo nominee rather than a surprise one.

"Mother And Child" is distinctly less promising, having the air of an aborted novel outline. It's set on a world inhabited by colonists from Earth who have suffered an unidentified reverse and declined to varying degrees of savagery. There are two competing groups of humans, the simple villagers called the Kotannes who worship Mother (Nature) and have women priests, and the city-dwelling Neaanes whose gods live with them. The uneasy peace between the two is shattered when the Neaane King Meron makes off with the Kotanne priestess Ettaa. She is already pregnant, seemingly a rarity in this world (although, strangely, Vinge never realises that such a society would quickly die out), and although Meron gets his heir he stokes up such a hatred for himself that he fails to find the support necessary to resist an invasion led by Ettaa's husband. While all this is going on, one of the gods, Tam, whisks Ettaa away to a moon to wait out the war, which has been manipulated by the gods, in reality an alien race trying to control good old human blood-lust; she is later returned to become leader of the planet.

It actually reads a lot better than it sounds, thankfully avoiding the gushing sentimentality such tales often attract. Part of this is due to the characters having rather more substance to them than those in "Fireship", but also to the story's being told from three viewpoints -- Ettaa's husband, King Meron (who comes across as a frustrated Henry VIII figure) and the 'god' Tam. There are also some entertaining asides concerning the race's treatment of the senses, speech having been replaced by sign writing, while those who are shortsighted become blacksmiths!

All in all, *Fireship & Mother And Child* is a diverting coupling that is recommended for long distance commuting -- but not so *The Outcasts Of Heaven Belt*, for in this we find the worst elements of traditional American SF. The fact of its being written by a woman only underlines the absorption of the feminists into the shoddy commercialism of the Del Rey axis, and should really have been dedicated to Larry Niven and all his fellow purveyors of soft-core space opera. It is no more than another retreat of *Shane*, the outsider in this case being a spaceship, captained by a woman, sent on a trading mission to a reputedly fabulously wealthy asteroid called Heaven Belt and finding its inhabitants on the verge of extinction after a violent intrasystem war (the causes of which are never explained -- her characters could have asked, but I suspect that Vinge just couldn't think of a reason). The two remaining states, crude sketches of Russia and the USA (with the asteroids now standing in for the Third World), want to capture Betha Torgussen's spaceship for themselves, or failing that, to destroy it, so it is her attempts to escape which make up the bulk of the novel.

This is yet another of those expanded short story efforts which drags along at a pace to make even the most uncritical reader despair. The characters are shallow stereotypes who seem to spend all their time either crying or shouting, thus pointing up, as did "Fireship", Vinge's lack of understanding of the human psyche. Betha Torgussen seems the very personification of the 'me' generation and, as the central pivot of the story, is supposed to engage our sympathies; instead, she repels them. But by far the most damaging aspect of the book is Vinge's scientific naivete; her attempts to 'harden' the story are simply laughable. One of the spaceship's crewmembers, for example, is a geriatric; the spaceship itself has wooden doorframes, a streamlined shape so that it won't corrode, and was obviously designed by a kamikaze since it only carries enough fuel for a one-way trip. The asteroids have an economic foundation which defies logic, since all supplies, including water, have to be flown in. Worst of all is the invented time system -- as an archaeologist, Vinge has perhaps encountered too many of those meaningless charts which lurk in the endpapers of academic tomes and purport to show everything from the birth of the first amoeba to the death of John Lennon; charts which always ignore the salient fact that the average human mind cannot comprehend such vastness of scale. We can only understand mathematical and abstract notions of time by breaking them down into chunks and naming the chunks: hence calling sixty minutes an hour, twenty-four hours a day, and so on. Not Vinge: her characters count in seconds, calling a day eighty kilosecs, and so on, and her inclusion of a time chart based on this absurdity only underlines how seriously she takes it. But no society on Earth, not even the mathematically-obsessed Toltec Indians, has ever measured time in this way, so what makes her think that we'll ultimately change?

The Outcasts Of Heaven Belt is a slapdash potboiler that is to be avoided -- and, given that it is an earlier work than "Fireship", one can hope that it is an aberration which will not be repeated.

Philip K Dick -- VALIS (Bantam, 227pp, \$2.25)

Reviewed by Paul Kincaid

My reaction to *Valis* is mixed, even paradoxical: it is boring, thrilling, infuriating, a major work, self-indulgent, confused, a clarification of Dick's ideas... and so on. My reaction changes with every page but, mostly, I am puzzled.

In a way, it substantiates my long-standing argument that SF must have literary merit as well as ideas. It is crammed full of exciting ideas, but for the most part lacks even basic literary technique (except in brief but dazzlingly good bursts, as in the first couple of chapters and the scene where Dick dreams that he is his own father). Then, about halfway through, the mishmash of ideas suddenly takes shape and becomes an archetypal Philip K Dick story; but up to this point it is boring.

Yet I feel that it is an important work, the first half perhaps even more than the second. Dick is laying down the theoretical basis for his novels; read as this, as a book on Dick, and you begin to see something of what it may be. What Dick has done, or has attempted, is to create an entire cosmogony, bringing together Christianity, Gnosticism, Buddhism, race memory, science fiction, pre-Socratic philosophy, Greek mythology, Wagner's *Parsifal* synthesised music and more to form a unified whole. It is a grandiose project, and it is hardly surprising that it doesn't come off; but it is his most ambitious work to date, and as such deserves respect.

The book would perhaps be more welcome in the mainstream, where the readership is sometimes willing to work, and where ideas -- as is so often the case in SF -- are not always predigested. But my concern lies more with the fact that it

is not a novel. At least, it breaks away from many of the traditional attributes of fiction. Or perhaps it would be better to say that it dresses reality in some of the attributes of fiction. There is a feeling of truth in *Valis*, an air of autobiography, but this is part of the confusion. Early on, Dick identifies himself with the main character, Horselover Fat. In a telephone conversation later, this is made more explicit:

"The information was fired at my friend Horselover Fat."

"But that's you. "Philip" means "Horselover" in Greek, lover of horses.

"Fat" is the German translation of "Dick". So you've translated your name." (p.156)

Throughout *Valis* Dick himself is a prominent character. Towards the end, Horselover Fat disappears:

"Kevin put his hand on my shoulder. 'I'm sorry to say this like this, Phil, but we really have the big clue already. In one instant that child cleared up your mind. You stopped believing you were two people. You stopped believing in Horselover Fat as a separate person. And no therapist and no therapy over the years... has ever been able to accomplish that.'" (p.182)

Dick's last novel, the brilliant *A Scanner Darkly*, also had an autobiographical element, including a specific reference to himself in the final note. Now he is even more explicit; the book, if anything, is even more painful. How far, then, is it a record of genuine psychosis?

There are those who see it as evidence that Dick has finally flipped. Perhaps they are ill-disposed towards the book because of the tedium of its first half, perhaps they are taking Dick too much at his word. My own feeling is that it bears as much similarity to Dick's state of mind as *A Scanner Darkly* did to the exact details of his drug abuse. He has called upon autobiographical experience, but fictionalised it in the time-honoured manner, taking the commonplace notion of the insane man who believes that he alone is sane, and exploding it by suggesting that the whole universe is insane or, rather, the product of an insane Mind. The resultant quest for the truth has, as it should, several red herrings and even, perhaps less satisfactorily, a few loose ends. It would be a mistake to let oneself be misled too much by these red herrings, and that is all I think lies behind the naming of one character as Philip K Dick.

One reason he may have done this is to emphasise the immediacy and personal importance of his search for God -- a search that is of necessity part intellectual and part physical. Here I think Dick's sense of balance has deserted him -- the intellectual aspect need not have occupied just over half the book, it need not have been decked out with heavyweight quotations and mystical agonising or been presented separately from the physical quest sparked by the film 'Valis'. This has been written by someone named Eric Lampton, who has achieved fame as the rock star Mother Goose and stars in the picture as a character named... Eric Lampton. The correlation between Lampton/Mother Goose and Dick/Horselover Fat is surely intended. Nevertheless, it must be admitted that neither the film nor the encounters that follow it would have made much sense without this philosophical underpinning.

Dick has always been a very philosophical writer, always questioning our most basic assumptions of reality, time, power and identity, seasoning his speculations with a dash of lunacy; when these preoccupations are brought together, we have such excellent novels as *Martian Timeslip*, *The Three Stigmata Of Palmer Eldritch* and *A Scanner Darkly*. *Valis* should belong to this exalted company; the reason it doesn't, I feel, is because Dick has taken on too much: to treat the nature of God in novel form as thoroughly as he attempts would require something akin to Proust's *Remembrance Of Things Past*. In 227 pages we are lucky that the ratio between fiction and tract is so nearly fifty-fifty.

My overall reaction to the book, then, is favourable. Dick completists will

buy it as a matter of course, but it might be worthwhile for a few others, those with adventurous minds, to pick it off the shelf. In among the admitted dross, there is a lot that is worthy of serious consideration -- because I foresee that, one day, someone will write a scholarly work setting Dick's novels within the universe of *Valis*.

Michael Talbot -- *MYSTICISM AND THE NEW PHYSICS* (Bantam, 209pp, \$3.50)

Reviewed by Dave Langford

Here we go again, on the same old bandwagon which starts with a reasonably intelligent tour of problems at the roots of quantum physics and after one chapter is slithering uncontrollably downhill. By Heisenberg's principle, to observe a microscopic system is to change it, and some physicists emphasize this by saying 'participator' rather than 'observer': this, says Michael Talbot, shows that when Uri Geller apparently gimmicked a Geiger counter in 1974 he was using 'psychoenergetic means'. Individual observations on the quantum level mean little, since quantum mechanics is usually interpreted as making statistical rather than absolute predictions: this (says Talbot) proves that experimental results depend on the consciousness of the observer and aren't repeatable. Wheeler's 'geometrodynamics' of 1962 postulated countless spatial wormholes permeating and connecting every apt of the universe: this (says Talbot) proves that our brains are linked to every portion of the cosmos and...

Let's pause a moment. Firstly, even under Newtonian physics our brains are linked to a good deal of the cosmos simply by gravity: this doesn't actually mean a lot. Secondly, look at the dates again: 1962, or the 1967 of the book's geometrodynamics reference, is a long time ago in physics and especially in the physics of gravitation, general relativity and cosmology, which has leapt forward astonishingly over the last decade. Great play is made with Sarfatti's theories (1974-5) of omnipresent mini-black and mini-white holes which are constantly formed and destroyed (a swift calculation giving the associated energy as equivalent to the detonation of half a ton of TNT: gosh); the whole business of tiny black holes was effectively demolished by Stephen Hawking around 1975, but - surprise! - Talbot includes no reference to Hawking. Thirdly, although being out of touch with physics is not a capital crime, Talbot doesn't even seem to understand probability: '...we have 100 hypothetical particles. Schrödinger's equation has enabled us to predict that 10% of these particles will strike in area A and the remaining 90% will strike in area B. As has already been stated, the behaviour of an individual particle cannot be predicted. Only the pattern of distribution of the entire group of particles follows predictable statistical laws. If we let the particles pass through the slit one by one we will notice that after 10% of the particles have struck area A, further particles passing through the slit seem to know that the probability has been fulfilled and shun the area.'

Cobblers! Utter cobblers! Schrödinger's equation makes a statistical prediction, just as I might predict that of a large number of tossed coins about 50% will come up 'heads'. Talbot apparently thinks that if you toss two coins and the first is 'heads', the second will 'know' that the probability has been fulfilled', and... After subtle reasoning of this order, it's unsurprising to find Talbot at the favourite game of rummaging through mystical texts for anything vaguely resembling a scientific concept, and repeatedly exclaiming 'This proves it!' Sample: some neurophysiologists have suggested that brain functions may involve a kind of internal bioluminescence. 'This light inside the skull may be the very self-illumination that the Upanishads refer to.' One person suggests the brain's pineal body may be the core of a holographic memory system. 'How appropriate, considering the pea-sized organ has long been regarded in the East as the "third eye"...' One must give him credit for subsequently mentioning that excision of the pineal body has no effect whatever on memory storage or recall: but the mystical impression has been made, and which bit do you think a gullible reader is meant to remember? Later it's proved that Tantric philosophy includes full knowledge of black holes: there is a Tantric concept called bindu, a mathematical

point within a black hole! Other Tantric/black-hole connexions seem to fit 1975 but not 1981 hole theory -- oh, hard luck. This approach can only debase mystic writings, which after all are offering religious parables and not wiring diagrams.

Even more so than its predecessors, this book is made unbelievable by the way in which the author overplays his hand. The universe is stranger than we can account for; science does not have all the answers; it remains possible to acknowledge these facts without going overboard and being prepared to believe absolutely anything. But, good grief, it's 1981 and Talbot still believes in Uri Geller...

ALSO RECEIVED...

Reviewed by Joseph Nicholas

Peter Nicholls (ed.) -- THE ENCYCLOPEDIA OF SCIENCE FICTION (Granada, 672pp, £4.95)

At last: the paperback edition of the work that won a 1980 Hugo as the best SF-related non-fiction book of 1979 and which, since its publication in hardcover, has become one of the most indispensable SF reference works ever written. As a straight reprint of that edition, with the same cut-off date of December 1977 to June 1978, it is in respect of many of its author entries now out of date (and, of course, it contains the same minor inaccuracies!) The worth of the book, however, lies not in its strictly factual material but in the critical values it brings to bear on its subjects. It easily supersedes all previous so-called 'encyclopedias' and will itself remain unsurpassed for a long time to come. Once you've bought it and begun to read it, you'll be wondering how you ever managed without it.

Jean M Auel -- THE CLAN OF THE CAVE BEAR (Hodder & Stoughton, 491pp, £4.95)

For a book given so little publicity, it's somewhat surprising that *The Clan Of The Cave Bear* spent several weeks on *The Sunday Times*'s bestseller lists late last year, but the apparent unusualness of its subject-matter may account for this. Set some 35,000 years ago, it tells the story of Ayla, a girl who, orphaned by an earthquake that kills her family, is accepted into a clan of 'others' and then has to struggle towards her own maturity and self-fulfillment in the face of their time-bound patriarchal strictures -- which thus makes it not at all unusual, for it is of course another over long saga of female emancipation. Auel has no real sense of mood or place; her scenes and characters acquire weight and presence through the relentless accumulation of detail rather than the precision or evocativeness of her description; and the reader's efforts at identification are not helped by her littering of the opening pages with such casual remarks as: "An enormous lioness, twice as large as any feline who would populate savannas far to the south in a much later age, had been stalking the herd" (emphasis mine), which deny us any feeling of ever being 'there'. It's an interesting failure, but that's about all; from its rather open ending and its downplayed main title of *Earth's Children*, I suspect there'll be a sequel.

Patricia A McKillip -- THE CHRONICLES OF MORGON, PRINCE OF HED (Sidgwick & Jackson, 688pp, £9.50)

This is the first one-volume hardback edition of a fantasy trilogy published to great acclaim in the United States throughout 1976-79 and to slightly lesser praise in the UK in 1979, although I personally can't see what all the fuss was about. Cast in the fairly standard quest/adventure mould, it details the struggles of the eponymous protagonist for enlightenment, wisdom, respect and a place of power, proving occasionally intensely lyrical and well-realised, but more often rather plodding. *The Chronicles Of Morgon* gives us only the familiar (and by now terribly boring) conflict between Good and Evil, deploying all the usual genre ingredients in the usual way and offering little of any great originality.

LETTERS

LETTERS NOW FROM FAMOUS MEN

Arthur C Clarke
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I've naturally read Andrew Stephenson's "Let Us Now Re-appraise Famous Men" (in *Vector* 100) with interest, and I would like to correct him on a couple of points.

As I have always taken great trouble to stress that I'm not a scientist, but a science writer, I strongly resent Mr. Stephenson's remark that I should "give up this pretense of being a scientist". I cannot be blamed for press-releases or media descriptions.

I have also been at great pains to credit all the early inventors of the space elevator -- not only Yuri Artsutanov. My *Omni* lecture was a popular version of the address I delivered at the Munich IAF Congress in 1979; detailed references would have been inappropriate in such a talk. In the published paper ("The Space Elevator: 'thought experiment', or key to the universe?": *Advances In Earth Orientated Applications Of Space Technology*, Vol 1 No 1, 39-48) I list no less than 12 names. (Unfortunately I was unable to include a reference to the amazing Ph.D. thesis of Jodrell Bank's Paul Birch, in which he shows it is possible to build a space elevator to any altitude from any point on the earth!)

I appreciate Mr. Stephenson's remarks about *Profiles Of The Future*, and am happy to report that I've just revised it completely, for a forthcoming (illustrated) Gollancz/Pan edition.

Mr. Stephenson's hint that I may have shown traces of egotism in the remote past (say around 1938) are, alas, not unfounded. But now that I've completely overcome that youthful defect, I'm one of the nicest people I know.

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About once in a blue moon I am moved to break my own rule of never replying to a review of one of my own books unless I am convinced that the reviewer has made a mistake of fact. Let me say at once that I don't think Roz Kaveney did make such a mistake in her notice of *A Dream Of Kinship* (*Vector* 101). She didn't like the book and that's that. Her reasons for not liking it appear to be largely subjective. She complains that

my vision of the universe is 'pastel-coloured'; that what has looked like 'reality' is a 'convincing artifice'; that she doesn't like 'series and sequels' per se; that she feels I am 'marking time' instead of pushing through to a deeper, better kind of SF novel writing' (type unspecified).

It is difficult for an author to rebut such criticisms because, like smoke, they tend to slip through the fingers of the mind and leave not a wrack behind. Unfortunately, again like smoke, they also tend to obscure rather than illuminate. I take it that 'pastel-coloured' is intended to be a mildly pejorative synonym for 'wishy-washy' though her addition of 'clear-edgedly precise' might seem to contradict this. Am I to understand that she would have preferred my word painting to be 'poster-coloured' or even 'strip-comic coloured'? Speaking as one who has used pastels in his time I would say that they are an extremely flexible medium and far superior to many others. But here again you see, it's a subjective matter.

The 'reality' versus 'convincing artifice' I find wholly baffling. Surely Ms Kaveney does not believe that there exists some higher species of fiction that is really 'real'? If she does she is in for a severe disappointment. All fiction is artifice and the best we can hope for is to make ours convincing. Having conceded that I have done this she appears to want me to make it 'real' too. I would dearly like to be able to gratify her wishes, but alas I am only

a writer of fiction, not God.

The 'series and sequels' point is an interesting one. Ideally the whole "Corlay" story, i.e. *Piper At The Gates Of Dawn*, *The Road To Corlay*, *A Dream Of Kinship* and whatever follows, should have been issued as one huge tome which could be read through from beginning to end in one go. It would certainly be a test of stamina -- both writer's and readers'. Unfortunately (or not, as you prefer) the exigencies of 20th Century publishing are against it -- in fact they would not even allow *Piper* and *Corlay* to appear in the same volume. The best I can hope for is that at some point in the future a fey publisher may feel that it is worth his while financially to issue all the stories in one enormous volume. I should be delighted if this happened because, believe it or not, they were all conceived as an organic whole.

Finally am I 'marking time' instead of 'pushing through to a deeper, better kind of SF novel writing'? I couldn't help feeling mildly flattered that anyone should ever have visualised me in this heroic role (a sort of Marco Polo of the genre, perhaps?) and I'm grateful that Ms Kaveney is at least prepared to admit me to the ranks of SF writers. But for the past fifteen years reviewers have consistently lambasted me for not doing what they told me to do last time. It is this, more than anything, which keeps alive my hopes that maybe I am pushing through to a deeper and better kind of SF writing and that they are too conditioned to seeing SF in 'poster-colours' to be able to recognise it.

:: Confucius, he say: "When irritated authors write to magazine, magazine doing something write." But quite possibly Confucius was wrong...

HOBSON'S CHOICE, OR PUNK SF

Steve Gooch John Hobson's comments in his "Standpoint" article on the
4 Pine Grove possibility of a British SF magazine show a total lack of
Rugby thought on the subject. First, how many shops does John
Warks, CV21 4BL actually believe deal exclusively in SF or have a considerable interest in marketing SF orientated publications?

Certainly not enough to make his suggestion viable. In practice, distributing an SF magazine to SF outlets exclusively will mean that only people with some sort of interest in SF will actually buy the mag, since obviously anyone who has no interest in SF is hardly likely to go into the shop in the first place. If this is the case then the prospective magazine is hardly going to break even, if we allow for the percentage of SF fans who aren't going to like the magazine anyway! The only way an SF magazine could possibly succeed in this country is to get it into W H Smith and the like.

One solution to this, which ties up nicely with Joe Nicholas's thoughts in his 'The Shape Of Things To Come' feature, would be to produce a magazine that publishes material from different genres all in the same issue. Not only would this lead to a partial reintegration of SF into the artificiality of the so-called 'mainstream' of literature, but it would provide an outlet for new SF on a large enough marketable scale to make it a viable commercial proposition.

:: A number of other people also wrote in about this subject, pointing out the practical difficulties. Ken Marin suggested that fanzines fitted the bill, except for their content (this generally being non-fiction) and that therefore with a circulation of 500 and the backing of the BSFA (i.e. free printing, but no interference) and the services of five people full time, a professional magazine could be produced. Presumably the five people would work for nothing, and the authors would write for nothing, and the advertisers would pay a fortune. Wishful thinking, Ken. You need to multiply the circulation by ten or a hundred, and then the free printing aspect vanishes. Chuck Connor also pointed out the financial difficulties but basically approved of the general idea. My own objections were summed up also by Andrew Sutherland in the opening to the following letter.

SF'S GENERATION GAP

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John Hobson's claim that a quality British SF magazine could be economically viable if published and distributed independently is not, I think, particularly sound. Independent record companies would not survive if the music press and DJs like John Peel did not bring their products to the public's attention or if their releases were not stocked by large chain stores as well as specialist shops.

Recently, some of the articles in *Vector* have shown that many people are not aware of SF's generation gap. When Heinlein's fiction was regarded as radical the works of C S Lewis were beginning to look commonplace and unoriginal. They had been superseded by fresher, more vital SF. Now, when Heinlein is regarded as a pedantic and bigoted writer, C S Lewis's novels look downright naive to the generation of readers which is used to the more progressive styles of Brian Aldiss, Kurt Vonnegut and Harlan Ellison. In the future, however, even these forward-looking writers will have their work belittled and criticised as being too conventional. At any rate, I hope they will. If they don't, it will mean that SF has ceased to develop and has become stagnant, which it looks as if it is beginning to do at the moment. Too many writers (including Heinlein) are relying upon the stories, styles and techniques which had impact in the past, but are no longer relevant to our situation today. Similarly, critics are shooting down easy targets, making wild generalisations about the past, instead of trying to examine SF from the viewpoint of the time in which it was written.

Writers and critics alike must remain aware that all fiction is temporary, retaining its effect only until the aspects of society which it attacked or criticised change or its style becomes archaic. Reading the early novels of Robert Heinlein or C S Lewis today, their work seems simplistic, idealistic and clumsy, but it must still be respected as work which was important to the development of science fiction. Modern SF may have outgrown its forefathers, but it must not forget their lesson of adapting with the times or it will lose its relevance and will become meaningless, lacklustre escapism, as more and more SF seems to be doing today.

- ** Something I've been seeing fairly often recently is a confusion of 'art' with 'relevance', and a consequent narrow perception of the purpose of fiction as the attack or criticism of societies. So that we find statements such as Andrew Sutherland's "... stories, styles and techniques which had impact in the past but are no longer relevant to our situation today" and "... all fiction is temporary, retaining its effect only until the aspects of society which it attacked or criticised change or its style becomes archaic". This, of course, must be why no one today reads or publishes Shakespeare or Jane Austen or Dickens (I counted a mere four different new editions of *Bleak* in a bookshop the other day), and why historical novels such as *Shogun* do not sell (at least, not more than several million copies). Such an attitude is, of course, totally ridiculous. The point about great art, great literature, is precisely that it transcends its time, that its application is universal, that it lasts. The dramas of Shakespeare are almost totally independent of the societies in which they take place, and have almost nothing to say about those societies. (I recall the Japanese film version of *Macbeth*, which I saw on television in Antwerp dubbed into German: despite my meagre knowledge of German -- about a dozen words -- the film was distinctly recognisable as *Macbeth*. I'd be hard pushed to find a better example of the independence of fiction from society.) Shakespeare's plays are about the passions of people, not societies. So let me hear no more that fiction is temporary: the two and a half thousand year old *Odyssey* is temporary, is it? Then why do writers still keep nicking the plot?

And the assertion that styles and techniques might be "no longer relevant to our situation today" (whatever that is) is plainly ridiculous. The

techniques used by Aldiss and Ellison do not differ substantially from those of Heinlein, Lewis, Dickens or Austen, and the differences in style are purely personal. If you want a different technique, read Virginia Woolf or James Joyce. Of course, they were writing in the 1920s, and the technique hasn't been used much since...

'Relevance' and 'art' are different things, and must not be confused. Literature becomes 'relevant' at the expense of its art, because a necessity to be 'relevant' narrows its scope. The 'relevant' prose of our time is journalism, no fiction, which is as it should be. It is not the primary purpose of literature to be 'relevant'. I shall be interested to hear your opinions, naturally.

CONCERNING A METAPHYSICAL ORIFICE

Ray Owen
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I cannot agree with something that Dave Langford says in the first paragraph of his review of *Under Heaven's Bridge* (*Vector* 101). As far as I am concerned *Miracle Visitors* didn't vanish 'up its own metaphysical orifice'. I've only been in the BSFA for a few months, and so I don't know what the general opinion of the book was, but I found it both entertaining and mentally stimulating. The theories contained in the plot were sufficiently complex for the reader to understand the difficulties that the characters confronted in trying to account for their experiences, without becoming so complicated that they were impossible to follow (rather like the grammar of this sentence).

I greatly enjoyed Joseph Nicholas's 'The Shape Of Things To Come', and feel that most of the points made are accurate. However, his sweeping statement about fantasy ("the plot can be as *deus ex machina* as possible because the readers are only looking for an intensely detailed imaginary worldscape") is veering dangerously towards over-generalisation. While what he says may be true of much published fantasy, I cannot accept that his comment applies to Donaldson's "Covenant" stories, and I live in hope that the success of them will lead other fantasy writers to think a little beyond the next elf.

**: I'm fairly sure that Joe did not intend his comment to apply to the "Covenant" stories, as I know he holds them in high regard; fairly obviously, Donaldson did not take the easy, *deus ex machina*, route in his writing. I think Joe would acknowledge that there are exceptions to his sweeping generalisations; it would be tedious to detail them all. In general I agree with him, but not everyone does...

"APOCALYPSE NOW" FOR JOSEPH NICHOLAS

David Shotton
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Shrewsbury
Shropshire

I really must protest about the article by Joseph Nicholas in *Vector* 101. I have only recently joined the BSFA, but I have seen other pieces of his work. I get the impression that anyone who doesn't like the same sort of thing in SF that he does cannot be regarded as an SF fan. His generalisations are quite annoying. Does he really believe that when an author continues a piece of work into more than one volume it becomes invalidated in some way? In any social grouping there is an amalgam of differing views, be the grouping the local WI, a political party, or SF fandom. I have just started an SF group here in Shrewsbury; if I were to enforce the sort of restrictions Nicholas is advocating I would never have a membership of more than one. If he wants to feel superior, okay. But what makes him so damned sure that his taste in SF is more valid than a fan who likes films, or Asimov, for instance? I would also like to point out that not every SF fan likes to have a full frontal attack on their intellect each time they pick up a book. A lot of people like to have a nice easy read; I know I do occasionally. Does Joseph Nicholas?

** That is a question that only Joe can answer. Personally, I find 'nice easy reads' that are nothing more somewhat tedious. C J Durham felt much the same way as David Shotton, and had this to say in addition:

C J Durham "The Shape Of Things To Come" was an example of all that makes (Joseph Nicholas) an appallingly bad reviewer. For 56 West Drive the year that I have been a member of the BSFA I have read Cheam Paperback *Inferno* solely to discover which novels have particularly infuriated Mr Nicholas and his acolytes, and then Surrey, SM2 7NA investigated them, on the grounds that anything which makes his blood boil must have some good qualities.

** Which sentiment strikes me as meaning that C J Durham doesn't like the same SF books as Joseph, rather than that Joseph is a 'bad' reviewer, absolutely. I considered his article to be well-reasoned and based on valid premises, or else I wouldn't have published it. I also find myself 'particularly infuriated' to see references to Joseph Nicholas's 'acolytes'. I assure you there are no such persons; there is no 'party line' with regard to books; there are only what I trust to be honestly held opinions, honestly expressed. If you disagree with them, the answer is to write what one might call a 'counter-review', that is, a letter saying what you would have said, had you been writing the review, rather than making generalised, unsupported statements. Let me say that C J Durham did go into specifics, and did not just write a tirade. James Miller has quite evidently taken Joe's teachings to heart...

James Miller I actually saw someone leaving a cinema yesterday, claiming to have enjoyed *The Empire Strikes Back*! My conscience forced me to kneel him in the groin, naturally. 'Moleside' What else could I do? I cannot allow empty-headed frivolity to take place in the hallowed territory of SF: 9 Appleton Drive Whitmore Mr Newcastle-u-Lyme Staffs.

Pardon my satire, but I think Mr Nicholas is going a little bit over the top. Some of us like a pinch of serious intent and deep characterisation with our soup. I do, for one. However I cannot see the merits of condemning everyone whose preferences differ as an empty-headed twit. Some of us strongly dislike big-selling, bland American big names. Once again, I fall into this category, but I fail to see why all who enjoy such material are mentally deficient carbuncles on the backside of mankind. So, maybe I'm a fly in the tea of society, but I thought Mr Nicholas was using a sledgehammer to crack a small (if somewhat irritating) nut.

** ... or perhaps not. Actually, Joe didn't have a lot to say about the readers in his article; he was on about the stories and novels themselves. It might pay to read the article as it is written, rather than reading things into it. It struck me as a lot less 'over the top' than some of his previous work, and the better for it, but without losing any of the passion. God damn it! The man cares.

Before we leave Joe Nicholas entirely, let me mention Cy Chauvin who picked up on a point from Joe's "Guns Of The Timberland" in *Vector* 99 and produced a list of critics since James Blish and Damon Knight who have been trying "to subject science fiction to some new critical theories", such as Brian Stableford, Samuel R Delany, Alexei & Cory Panashin and Joanna Russ.

GENERAL COMMENTS

Jon Wallace I've just finished re-reading *Vector* 101 and I feel that 21 Charleston Street I ought to write and say something about it. But where Dundee, DD2 4RG to start? So much of the thing has spurred some reaction even if it's only "I agree with that". I know, I'll start at the front and work my way through.

Editorial: It's all very well trying to work towards a standard which can be applied to a book regardless of genre (and your editorials on the subject have gone a long way towards this) but when it's all finished, who's going to apply this standard, and what to? If this standard is used in publications dealing primarily with SF then it is only SF fans who will read them, and as far as I can see SF fans don't really need convincing. Other reviews (e.g. in the review columns of Sunday papers) tend to ignore much of the currently published fiction, and in their occasional SF column generally act as if they are sully- ing their typewriters by using them to type reviews of Sci-Fi. The attitudes inherent in this type of thinking have been ignoring the more literary aspects of SF for years anyway. Any suggestion that they have been looking at the books as a separate genre when they could have been reviewed by a common standard will be received with horror or with the sort of "There, there, don't worry about it" attitude normally reserved for small boys who tell Daddy how to fix his car. Still.

The Shape Of Things To Come: Reintegration with the mainstream, eh. Good idea, I'd like to see it happen. But, the same argument applies here as to the editorial. People who think they know better are not going to take any notice of us weirdo SF fanatics rattling our cages out here in the ghetto. (Damn! I swore I wasn't going to use 'ghetto'.) The people Joe's talking to here don't really need convincing. Everybody I've talked to has noticed that books are getting worse. Even escapism ain't what it used to be. The people that Joe ought to be talking to won't take any notice anyway. They're all too busy trying to make their fortune before the whole thing vanishes up its own anus.

Punk SF: I used to be fond of saying that SF has had its punk phase, in the form of the new wave in the 60s. I hadn't thought about the distribution aspect of punk music. I suppose that now I'll have to say that SF had its 'Liverpool sound' in the 60s and that the time is now ripe for its punk revolution. I agree with John Hobson on this particular point (i.e. distribution) but I must confess that the new wave movement was analogous to punk in regard to its content. Both phases had a lot of garbage produced in the early days, but after the first flush of rebellion passed, the old wave was modified by the new with the sum ending up greater than the parts which had been forced together. Attitudes and perspectives were added to SF which had not been possible under the old gosh-wow scheme of things.

On the whole, I think that this Vector was the best so far under your editorial guidance. Thank you for giving me the chance to see that Joe Nicholas can write reasonably thought out articles if he puts his mind to it.

John A Robson
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London, SE22 0DP

Thanks for printing my missive re Punk SF, but I should point out a couple of errors, namely that it was the other Chris, as in Evans, who was bringing up the topic (not Chris Priest, as printed) and the meeting was in Hammersmith (not Hounslow). Either Arthur Guinness has got to me, or I'm suffering a timeslip. While I'm at it, a couple of comments on *Vector* 101.

The layout is currently the best in the two-plus years I've been a member. The cover by McFarlane and the new logo give a far more professional look to the magazine. The lack of artwork inside is unfortunate. As you are at the whim of your contributors, *Vector* often resembles, in content, rejects from *Foundation*. In particular, David Wingrove's piece "Saving The Tale", while competent in the strictly academic sense, managed the rare feat of crawling up its own bum, as it lurched nowhere in particular. One glance at the notes and once again we have a dissection of Explorations of the Marvellous et al; surely the time has come to stop these meaningless diatribes. Also, could you ban people from mentioning SF as 'ghetto' literature, and all the other cliches of SF reviewing? Let them think up something different! Why does *Vector* not also cover films, TV, radio, and music with the same depth as books? SF has left the pulps far behind it. so should this not be reflected? Or is it the old

problem of lack of contributors? *Vector* has definitely more bite than before, so maybe that's why authors are running shy of interviews. The first *Vectors* I read had fawning, gushing, chummy talks, typical fanzine fare, so hopefully these will be avoided in the future.

** It must have been the Guinness getting to me while I was typing that caused those errors; sorry, John. On David Wingrove's piece, I cannot accept that it is a 'meaningless diatribe'. On the contrary, it is a thoughtful piece which repays thoughtful reading. As for films, TV, and the rest -- how about Martyn Taylor's piece this time as a step in the right direction? Personally, I am doubtful that once you get beyond the written word an artform can be described as 'science fiction'. So that novels and stories can be SF, and so can films, TV and radio, being based -- presumably -- on written scripts. But SF music? SF art? What exactly do those terms mean? Why stop there? SF sculpture, SF glass-blowing, SF cookery, SF basket weaving.... The elements that make something SF are surely dependent on the written word, ultimately, so how can a guitar, or even a synthesiser, piece be SF? And what is SF art? If nothing more than pictures of spaceships or women in tin bras I'm not interested. This has little to do with John's letter, but it has concerned me for some time. No doubt the artists and musicians among you will be able to enlighten me.

DOWN IN DINGLEY DELL

Nic Howard
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Bucks.
I should like to comment on the letter from Dell Publishing that you reproduced. In my view, if any publisher wishes to spend money -- presumably hard to come by money in this time of crisis in the publishing business -- on mailing out books, then right, fine, okay, that's their business, and they can do what they like. (They can send some to me if they want...) Let them waste their money. I hope they think it's worth it, and that SFWA members who receive such free handouts don't vote for it out of any sense of 'obligation', but only if they were going to vote for it anyway.

P.S. Just thought of something, and looked in the August 1980 *Locust*: Jim Frenkel (SF editor of Dell according to the letter) was married to Joan Vinge, author of *The Snow Queen*: No comment!

Joseph Nicholas
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The interesting thing about the letter from Dell Books isn't the shameless way they're hyping Joan Vinge's *The Snow Queen* nor even the equally shameless way they trumpet an earlier success, but the identity of the person who signed it -- because in private life Jim Frenkel is Vinge's (second) husband and, moreover, the editor who bought the book in the first place (a connection which looks as though it could bear investigation itself). Can anyone doubt that, had the book won the Nebula, his career -- as the golden boy who made it all possible -- would have been immeasurably advanced?

In the event, of course, and as you know by now, this year's BSFA Award winner, Gregory Benford's *Timescape*, won the Nebula, and Dell's hype proved to have been a waste of time (which might account for Frenkel's having now left them, but I doubt it). Just as well, really, since something as generically incestuous as *The Snow Queen* is hardly (pace Mark Greener) a book that can be upheld as an example of frontier-breaking imaginative endeavour: reasonably well-written it might be, but it's otherwise sheer tosh. *Timescape*, on the other hand... well, it's one of the books I pointed to in "The Shape Of Things To Come" as the way for SF to go and, I feel, thus far more deserving a work.

Minor point, as a correction to your parenthetical aside about Zane Grey's *Guns Of The Timberland* in the body of Arnold Akien's piece: it's not so much

that it has transcended its genre as has just become a famous and well-known example of it -- in the same manner as, say, *Dune* and *Stranger In A Strange Land*. In terms of its tropes, metaphors, symbology and what have you, it's still as ghettoised as any other average western novel; just as, of course, *Dune* and *Stranger In A Strange Land*, for all their fame, are still as ghettoised as any other ordinary SF novel.

SCIENTIFACTION REVISITED

Mary Gentle
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Dorset

Thought I would drop you a line on *Vector* 101, specifically the "Scientifaction" Standpoint article. What can I say about this piece of slanted reportage? That it's obtuse, not to say obscure, is only to state the obvious. However, dealing with such of William Bains's remarks as are decipherable, it appears that he's defending styleless, banal, characterless and shoddy books on the grounds that they nevertheless contain great ideas. I don't claim we should throw out good ideas because they're part of bad writing -- but can anyone name me one five-star blockbusting SF idea that didn't come with some trace of literary capability enclosing it?

On the subject of ideas themselves: the book he cites (*The Note In God's Eye*) depends on the overt or implicit use of force for its resolution -- but his approach doesn't lead him to question the morality of this. It seems that in his opinion we must throw out not only plot, style and characterisation, but also ethics.

**: Now that's strange. The way I read William Bains's piece was as a plea not to forget science, or 'ideas', altogether, and not at all as a demand that 'ideas' be the only aspect worth considering -- and here's Mary Gentle reading it in exactly the opposite way. Seems that a re-read might be in order here... (Excuse me.) Nope! I haven't changed my mind. I also think that William did spot the point about the resolution of the plot of *Note*, and a condemnation was implicit in the way he pointed it out: look again at the sentence that goes from page 18 to page 19.

WE ALSO HEARD FROM...

Paul Kincaid, who felt that my last editorial was straying down a blind alley. I hope that the current editorial is back on course, and shows that the alley was not so blind after all. Paul agrees with me that literary criticism must be based on a critic's judgement of plot, characterisation, style, use of language, and so on. All in all, it was a more helpful letter than the space I've given to it here might suggest.

Lee Mandham, who seems to have liked the Heinlein equibs, but seems to think that BSFA is pronounced 'beezer-fey'. This is a good, and original, try -- but wrong. The correct pronunciation is 'boxfer'...

Paul Turner, who wanted to have a look at the Arthur C Clarke letter. Anything to oblige, Paul. (Incidentally, being by the time you read this an ancient 28 year old, I listen to Terry Wogan on Radio 2 in the morning. Mr Wogan very quickly cottoned on to a certain TV series about unsolved mysteries of the natural world, noting that its eponymous presenter actually did very little except walk on a Sri Lankan beach clad in a parasol and a towel, offering words of wisdom. Mr Wogan's slighting remarks about "Arthur C Mullan's Mysterious World" are a joy to hear...)

Mark Gorton, who sent in an article about the film *Stalker* just too late for inclusion in the last issue. Just as well, really, as *Matrix* featured a review of said film. So that, although Mark thought his piece would fit better in *Vector* than *Matrix*, I had to send it back to him.

Interesting point, actually: where should the dividing line between the two magazines be drawn in matters such as media SF where there has been some overlap?

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