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VECTOR

The Critical Journal of the BSFA

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CONTENTS

THIS ISSUE

The most obvious feature of the contents listing is the appearance of a new regular column -- REASSESSMENTS. This is a logical development of the Quest for the Critical Standard, which, I think, the book reviewers are keeping in mind in their reviews now. There are a lot of stories and novels in the field which are held to be 'classics', for a variety of reasons only one of which is that they are very good. The Reassessments column provides a place for an in-depth, er, reassessment of these so-called classics in the light of all that has been published since. To start, we have Mary Gentle looking again at Asimov's 'Nightfall' and finding a perhaps unexpected reason why it has achieved classic status. David Penn looks at a James Blish collection, *Galactic Cluster*, and John Hobson reassesses M John Harrison's novel *The Pastel City*. (Both of these, incidentally, began life as reviews of recently reissued books; I hope that in future you will be sending me Reassessments written as such.)

In the main article this issue, 'Science and Fantasy in Science Fiction', Kathy McCutcheon looks at the 'science' and asks how scientific it is, really.

Standpoint looks a bit weak and feeble this issue. This is not to denigrate Colin Greenland's piece on another new science fiction magazine, *Interzone*. Rather it is the case that Colin's piece looks somewhat lonesome. Does no one have anything they feel the need to complain about in science fiction? Does everyone agree with everyone else? I can't believe that. In the article, Colin gives a list of authors who have promised contributions to *Interzone*: he telephoned me just too late to amend the copy with the news that Angela Carter can also now be included. Looks good.

And naturally enough, there are also the Book Review and Letters columns.

Though I don't often start out with a theme in mind for an issue of *Vector*, it quite often happens that one emerges. The question of reality, of science and of language, arises not only in Kathy McCutcheon's article, but also in Mary Gentle's Reassessment, Paul Dembina's letter, and Joseph Nicholas's review of *The Affirmation* by Christopher Priest. It's a subject I think could be explored even more to good effect (hint!).

Perhaps I was wrong about the 'most obvious feature' of the contents. The immediately obvious feature of the page is a cartoon strip -- MacHINERY -- by Bob Shaw and Jim Barker. I'll be running a couple of these per issue until they run out, as it were. (If you think they are any good, write to your local newspaper and demand that they buy it. I'm sure Bob and Jim will be willing to sell.)

And finally, the end-of-page fillers: they are taken this time from *Micro Infinity* by John E Muller, a Badger Book! Thanks to Nick Trant for digging them out. (I'm not sure I could have faced the job...)

MISCELLANIUMS

The BSFA Award gets underway again with this mailing. Don't forget to vote. If you're not sure about what to read and nominate, you could always try the review column; we've reviewed some good stuff there over the last year...

This is a bit sad for me, but I've decided to resign as editor of *Vector*. I've told Chairman Alan that I will do another two issues (105 and 106), and then it's up to someone new. Volunteer editors should write to Alan Dorey at the address on page 2, offering their services, as soon as possible. I originally intended staying as editor for two years, which at the time meant eight issues. Well, I'll have done the eight issues, but in something under the two years. I'll let you know in 106 what I think I've achieved...

EDITORIAL: Critical Stances

Strange as it may seem, this editorial is not a theoretical tract on the abstruse and esoteric aspects of literary criticism in SF. What it is is much more incestuous than that: a review of three other SF critical magazines (because, believe it or not, *Vector* is not unique in this universe, nor even this country). I'm going to look at the latest issues, or the latest I have, of *Foundation*, *The Patchin Review* and *Arena SF*, and see how they approach literary criticism.

Foundation, 'the review of science fiction', is the heavyweight -- over a hundred pages long, three times a year. It regularly features well-known SF writers and critics, and is currently edited by David Pringle. It is intended to be, and succeeds in being, a very serious academic journal, in which very serious SF matters are discussed very seriously. *Foundation* 22, the June 1981 issue, leads off with a long article by Roz Kaveney entitled 'Science Fiction in the 1970s'. Long as it is, it is not long enough to properly encompass the decade -- but then, consider what would be. Roz moves at a gallop, spending half a paragraph on each major influence, a line or two on other noteworthy writers and books, and a word or three on those matters she feels need condemning. Mostly she is spot on, but I do wish the condemnations had shown more fire, had been more damning.

Raymond Z Gallun contributes another in the long-running series 'The Profession of Science Fiction', in which authors write about their work, and why they write what they do. Patrick Parrinder, a lecturer in English at Reading University, writes about the SF of J B S Haldane and Naomi Mitchison. Brian Stableford considers 'Man-Made Catastrophes in SF' -- another big theme treated at length. The letter column is rather short: just five letters, though one or two do go on a bit. Tha magazine is rounded out with book reviews, again deep and worthy.

What you won't find in *Foundation* is jokes. Well, I tell a lie: Ursula Le Guin's letter, about Greg Benford, is an extended joke, and rather a good one, and the book reviews may be found to contain the occasional satirical barb. But the overall tone of the magazine is unrelievedly grave. It is easy to see why this is so. *Foundation* has been trying to get itself, and science fiction, accepted in the serious literary world. It takes science fiction seriously, it takes itself seriously, as if to introduce a joke or a tone of levity would destroy that serious intent. Probably the editors have been correct. The literary establishment is ready enough to dismiss SF as kids' stuff ray-ships and space-guns, without giving them the extra ammunition of an apparently 'lightweight' manner. Personally, I consider this the problem of the literary establishment. It is quite feasible -- and sometimes preferable -- to say serious things in a mocking, irreverent or downright funny way. The result, in *Foundation*, is academic, erudite, informed, intellectual, serious... but not a lot of fun.

On the other hand, *The Patchin Review*...

This new little magazine -- the first issue was July 1981 -- is edited and published by Charles Platt, and has a sub-title, 'The unique and controversial guide to science fiction', which I find strange and contradictory. Platt, as fans from the 60s will remember, is fond of controversy, encouraging it for its own sake as often as not. This is a technique guaranteed to rouse passions, but to do so in an artificial way, to no useful purpose. One emerges remembering the argument, not what it was about.

The Patchin Review 1 consists of what I can best describe (to *Vector* readers) as a collection of Standpoints. Barry Malzberg writes about the 'leading edge' of science fiction, and comes to the conclusion that it is action-packed and escapist, and avoids ethical or political positions. Anyone remember Joseph Nicholas's 'The Shape of Things to Come' from *Vector* 101? Harlan Ellison writes an annoyed piece in which he ends by challenging John Shirley to a duel by typewriter. (Shirley's reply is in issue 2, which I have seen but not read, and boils down to: "Grow up, Harlan".)

Something I do not like, and it is something Platt encourages in the name of free speech, is the number of articles published pseudonymously: five of them, more than half. The strange thing is, none of them is nasty enough to warrant hiding the name of the author. What are these people scared of? The first is a piece on writers' workshops by 'Cousin Clara', which is the biggest load of old bollocks I have ever read on the subject. The author is obviously an over-sensitive soul who once produced a bad story for a workshop, was thoroughly slammed for it, and blames the other attendees and the workshop method generally. Who the hell is 'Cousin Clara' anyway? 'Gabby Snitch' contributes a gossip column full of boring chit-chat which misses all the good stuff. Read *Ansible* instead: it's better written, faster paced, and much more to the point.

John Shirley stomps all over bad writers in SF (e.g. Barry Bongyear) in a way much beloved of *Paperback Inferno* reviewers. Good stuff, though, and the sort of idea that has to be said over and over again to beat it through the thick skulls of all the dim cretins who like formula fiction and nothing but formula fiction, and vote it Hugos. And at the end, in the very short book reviews, Platt flaunts his prejudices, stomping a Christopher Priest book merely because it is by Christopher Priest. Hooray for objectivity!

I fail utterly to see how *The Patchin Review* lives up to its sub-title description. Controversial it will be, if anyone takes it seriously enough, but 'guide to science fiction'? Guide for whom? Newcomers will find nothing here to guide them, and old-timers can find better guides than this, which points in five different directions at once. Platt professes idealism, but I see no basis for it in any theoretical view of SF -- merely a gathering of other people's opinions, and lots of encouragement to shout at each other.

Finally we come to *Arena SF*, edited and published by Geoff Rippington, a twice yearly magazine issue 12 of which has recently appeared. It began life as a fanzine, but has now, with the aid of the South East Arts Association, 'moved up'. Geoff has been very successful in getting the 'names' of SF to contribute, and *Arena* has had some very good articles. In issue 12, James Corley looks at SF and religion; Ian Watson expounds the difficulties experienced by reviewers (outside SF) with his book *The Gardens of Delight* caused by its being labelled 'fantasy', and considers the nature of labels on books generally; and Richard Cowper is interviewed. The contributors, particularly of book reviews, overlap with those of *Vector* and *Foundation*, and the tone of the magazine lies between the two. It is serious but without the intellectual weight of *Foundation*, and lacks the irreverence and willingness to challenge and question of *Vector*. The editorial presence is not strong, and the magazine tends to lack continuity from one issue to the next.

Despite my reservations, it is good to see other critical journals in existence. At the very least, it proves people care.

FOUNDATION: David Pringle, 21 The Village Street, Leeds, LS4 2PR (£5 for 3 issues)

THE PATCHIN REVIEW: UK agent, David Pringle, address as above (£6 for 6 issues)

ARENA SF: Geoff Rippington, 6 Rutland Gardens, Birchington, Kent, CT7 9SN (£1.80 for 3 issues, 60p for 1 issue)

Science and Fantasy in Science Fiction

Kathy McCutcheon

At the time he began work on the novel *Stand on Zanzibar*, John Brunner writes that he had:

> "been growing increasingly dissatisfied with my regular science fiction writing. I could feel processes at work around me shaping the future, like a crazy explosive-forming process: Black Power and the Beatles, LSD and Viet Nam, hippies and skinheads -- and I was becoming more and more frustrated at my inability to capture all of them, or even a fair proportion, simultaneously." (1)

Brunner's solution was to adapt for *Stand on Zanzibar* John dos Passos's 'technique of documentary association' (2), probably for the same reason dos Passos invented it in the first place. Both writers were interested not so much in individual characters as in whole societies, and in their characters primarily as expressive movements within those societies. Brunner saw as his "chief task ... not to create a story on the basis of (my) initial plot assumptions, but to create a convincing world for the plot to happen in... The protagonist of my book was going to have to be the world entire.' (3)

By choosing a similar protagonist in *Midcentury*, the *USA* trilogy, and other works, dos Passos took up a problem that is usually of far greater concern to fantastic writers than to realistic ones. A realistic novelist can usually assume that most of his readers are aware of the broad social context in which his action takes place; the world need not be explained to the reader. The writer can allude to particular events and conditions directly, obliquely or metaphorically, as suits him, and get on with his main business -- his characters' lives within that world.

For a work of science fiction, however, some or all of this context must be invented, or at the very least extrapolated from present conditions; and not only the background but the foreground as well. The farther one moves from present-day reality, the less one has access to convenient touchstones -- familiar ideas and images that can provoke an immediate response from the reader. In wholly imaginary worlds, such as the far future, even the simplest rituals of everyday life must be carefully thought out, and emotionally significant metaphors must be manufactured from thin air.

Brunner's concern with not only the creation but the presentation of his world thus led him to come to terms with what is probably the central problem of science fiction: one cannot tell a coherent story without a coherent world for it to take place in. The care and, more important, the fundamental assumptions with which a science fiction writer constructs his world are crucial to his work's success in a way that is largely foreign to works of realism.

In his essay 'Structural Fabulation', Robert Scholes describes modern literature as being suspended between realism and fantasy, unable to satisfy the requirements of either one. Fiction cannot adequately depict 'reality' because there is no direct correspondence between the ideas and symbols of language

and the objects and events of the world outside language. Scholes writes:

> "Modern critics have shown with devastating irony that even a great 'realist' like Balzac did not make his linguistic code correspond with reality in-itself but simply alluded in his language to other already codified beliefs, other codes which themselves inevitably lack genuine ontological status. Language is language and reality is reality -- and never the twain shall meet... The physicists are quite ready to admit the same shortcomings in their mathematical language." (4)

(Against the 'realistic fallacy' Scholes sets a corresponding fallacy of fantasy -- "It has insisted that it is capable of non realism... No man has succeeded in imagining a world... with characters and situations that cannot be seen as mere inversions or distortions of (our) all too recognisable cosmos" (5) -- and suggests that literature can deal with both problems at once through a 'fiction of the future' he calls 'structural fabulation'. (6))

Fantasy literature has a history of mocking references to the notion of an isomorphism between language and the world. For instance, Borges's story 'The Aleph' depicts a man who sets out to write an epic poem describing the topography, peoples, flora and fauna, and noteworthy historical events of every place in the world; he not only finishes the poem but, to the narrator's disgust, wins the Second National Prize for Literature in Argentina. (7) And in Lewis Carroll's *Sylvie and Bruno Concluded*, a character named Mein Herr tells of a country where:

> "'We actually made a map of the country, on a scale of *a mile to the mile*! ... We haven't spread it out yet,' said Mein Herr: 'the farmers objected ... So we now use the country itself, as its own map, and I assure you it does nearly as well.'" (8)

But if there is one branch of fantasy that takes the 'realistic fallacy' seriously, it is science fiction. The traditional dogma of science fiction assumes that science provides a map of the universe on a scale of a mile to the mile -- or will when our knowledge is more complete. One need only be faithful in translating the symbols of science into the symbols of fiction, and one's story will be not only as plausible, somewhere in space-time, as 'The Aspern Papers' or 'Daisy Miller', but even more so. It is a favourite belief of science fiction writers that the field's proximity to science gives it some of the predictive power of valid scientific hypotheses. The example most commonly mentioned is the 1944 story 'Deadline' by Cleve Cartmill, which described the then-secret atomic bomb so accurately that it brought intelligence agents to the office of *Astounding*. The field's yearning for realism and its faith that sciencecan provide it can also be seen in the way such writers as Damon Knight, 'William Atheling, Jr.' and Isaac Asimov regularly castigated writers for errors of scientific fact.

How this belief would theoretically translate into the invention of imaginary worlds can be seen in two essays in Reginald Bretnor's *Science Fiction Today and Tomorrow*. This collection of essays by various authors, writes Bretnor in the preface, "was written to a prepared table of contents, from which we departed only very slightly." The editors "made no effort to confine... authors too rigidly to the defined limits of their subjects, or to inhibit their discussion of whatever matter they considered pertinent." (9) Poul Anderson was invited to write whatever he considered pertinent under the title 'The Creation of Imaginary Worlds' and Hal Clement under the title 'The Creation of Imaginary Beings'.

What is immediately striking about both essays is that each writer chose to interpret his assignment in the most literal, scientific way possible.

Anderson's essay is an engaging primer on designing a planet according to modern astronomical knowledge; he shows the reader the relationship between a star's mass and its colour, luminosity and life-span, how to design an orbit so that the planet will be habitable and to calculate the length of its year, and how to invent scientifically plausible moons, length of day and seasonable variations. All these and other helpful instructions are accompanied by graphs giving numerical ratios for various astronomical relationships. (10)

Clement's essay, 'The Creation of Imaginary Beings', begins approximately where Anderson's leaves off -- given as astronomically plausible planet, how does one design an ecologically plausible system of flora and fauna to inhabit it? Clement discusses the need for a creature's environment to be compatible with its abilities and limitations, explains such basics as the square-cube law (11), and suggests that the writer think through not only the present ecology but individual creatures' evolutionary development as well. This essay is less technical -- it contains no graphs or equations -- but its focus, like the previous essay's, is unmistakeably scientific. (12)

Both writers assume, Anderson implicitly and Clement explicitly, that the writer's imagination moves from science to the story. For instance, Anderson writes:

> "The horizon distance -- for a man standing on a flat plain -- is proportional to the square root of the planet's diameter. On Earth it is about five miles, and for globes not very much bigger or smaller, the change will not be striking. Often mountains, woods, haze or the like will blot it out entirely... Yet even in this apparent triviality some skillful writer may see a story." (13)

The different horizon distance is the given; the events this difference generates come next; and why these events are important to the people involved (or to the writer) comes last of all. Clement faces this ordering of ideas directly:

> "As it happens, I get most of the fun out of working out the physical and chemical nature of a planet or solar system, and then dreaming up life forms which might reasonably evolve under such conditions. The story... comes afterward." (14)

Compare this statement with Brunner's remark that "my chief task was... to create a convincing world for the plot to happen in." For Brunner, the imaginative movement is from a collection of impulses, observations and fears that he feels are important, to a story that can contain them, to a world that can contain such a story -- and finally to a method of presenting the world that can convey to the reader both the story and the feelings that generated it. His story is apt to be a better story than Clement's or Anderson's, because it is not an afterthought tacked on to an extrapolation of scientific principles, but is rather his primary interest. His world, too, is apt to be more meaningful, because it is necessary to the story not only on a strictly physical level, but emotionally as well. When Brunner uses the word 'world', he is obviously referring to whole realms of experience that Anderson does not seem to consider pertinent.

No linear model of a writer's imaginative movement can work. The relation between science and science fiction is far more subtle than Anderson and Clement assume when they speak of the creation of imaginary worlds and creatures wholly in terms of astronomy, ecology and the theory of evolution. For one thing, no good science fiction is written with the primary purpose of communicating scientific data. The science is always a device to allow the story to take place. And very few good stories of any kind are written for

the purpose of allowing the writer to show off this or that literary device. The device, although necessary, is subordinate to the story, even in science fiction, a genre that is defined more by its devices than by its subjects. In fact with any writer -- including, I would venture, Clement -- the science and the story are thought up, and later modified, more or less simultaneously. This is true of *Stand on Zanzibar* as well: Brunner writes, "I was fairly sure I was going to write about a breakthrough in tectogenics -- artificial optimisation of the embryo -- because no other event could cause such a dramatic upheaval in the world I was thinking about." (15)

Second, the kind of hypothetical realism -- the depiction of a scientifically plausible world -- advocated by Anderson, Clement, and virtually everyone else in the field is, in practice, mitigated by a host of fantasy elements. Science fiction writers use hard science for precisely as long as it supports the requirements of their fiction; when it no longer does, they fantasise freely. This is both necessary and desirable. In filling an imaginary world with details, the alternatives to fantasy are anachronism, dullness, or both. In order to keep up a pretense of adherence to science in the face of this necessity, the field has adopted a number of devices and, within itself, agreed to call them scientific. In fact, many of these conventions inhabit at best the furthest periphery of science, and the exact point where they shade off into pure imagination is, precisely because it is in no way a barrier, impossible to determine.

One such convention is hyperspace. In its simplest form, the idea of hyperspace is that there exists a fourth spatial dimension in addition to the three that we know. More complex formulations posit multiple hyperspatial dimensions, multidimensional time, forking time-paths, interchangeable time and space dimensions, and other innovations. Multidimensionality is the basis for such science fiction staples as time travel, parallel worlds, and faster-than-light travel.

But such uses have only a tangential relationship to the actual mathematical concept of hyperspace. N-spatial geometry was first developed formally in the mid-1800s as a device for plotting algebraic equations of many variables as curves on a geometric coordinate system. This usage is, of course, purely theoretical, since no one has seen these curves in real life. Current applications of n-dimensional space include statistics, which must often deal with a great number of variables, and molecular physics, in which six variables, three for position and three for velocity components, are required to plot an individual molecule's behaviour. (16) Neither of these uses, nor most of the others to which n-space is usually put, postulates an actual fourth spatial dimension. To the extent that science fiction hyperspace is based on these conventional uses, it is merely a fantasy of mathematical language translated into a fantasy of words.

The primary argument for science fiction's use of hyperspace rests with relativity theory: relativity uses four-dimensional mathematics to describe curvature in three-dimensional space. I have two points to make about this. First, the relationship between space, gravity, and other forms of energy is only beginning to be understood, and the idea of curvature is only a mathematical model -- a metaphor -- that, when we know more, may be replaced with an entirely different concept. Secondly, even assuming that this model is essentially correct, hyperspace as used by relativity lies far, far in the background of the kind of hyperspace described in, say, Roger Zelazny's *Amber* series or any story using time travel -- so far in the background as to be, perhaps, over the horizon.

A similar case could be made even for artificial intelligence, which current science is working actively to achieve (something that cannot be said for

travel through hyperspace). In *Godel, Escher, Bach: an Eternal Golden Braid*, Douglas Hofstedter writes:

> "Once some mental function is programmed, people soon cease to consider it as an essential ingredient of 'real thinking'. The ineluctable core of intelligence is always that next thing which hasn't been programmed... 'AI is whatever hasn't been done yet.'" (17)

In part, Hofstedter is commenting on the public's resistance to the idea of a man-made creature that is the equal of -- or superior to -- humans. But the people mentioned in the passage include not only laymen but computer scientists as well. As Hofstedter goes on to show, the attempt to create artificial intelligence has led scientists to increasingly profound discoveries about what exactly intelligence is; and the more they discover, the farther they find themselves from their goal.

The truly conscious device, if it is ever invented, may be entirely different from the modern computer because, again, the computer's functioning is based on a mathematical model, i.e. a metaphor, for human thought. Stories in which computers are understood to have essentially human personalities, or in which human minds are transferred whole into electronic brains, take this metaphor for fact. But a metaphor is, of course, only a partial truth at best, and thus changeable. These stories postulate something that may be as remote from modern science as time travel, and they do it using assumptions about present science that are not at all firmly established.

Thus for all but the safest speculations the idea of scientific plausibility collapses under paradox. For any development as advanced as time travel or artificial intelligence, any explanation using twentieth-century knowledge has to be wrong, because by the time these things come about science itself will have changed almost unrecognisably. It is as if a nineteenth-century writer were to describe the properties of gravity using only Newtonian physics; its very plausibility makes it implausible. On the other hand, to invent new laws of nature and a new science to explain these devices -- no matter how carefully and technically -- is obviously to fantasize.

For every uncannily accurate description of an atom bomb, science fiction contains several hundred devices so advance they cannot even be rationally postulated in scientific terms: teleportation devices, energy shields, 'instant messages' between stars, telepathic machines, devices to free the mind from the body -- the list is endless and wonderful. A field that expects a writer to be scrupulously exact in designing the chemical mix of his imaginary planet's atmosphere, and then lets him get his characters (one of them a telepathic, neurotic computer) onto the planet by hyperspace drive, obviously has a highly conventional view of scientific plausibility. This view is very concisely expressed by 'William Atheling, Jr.', in his book *More Issues at Hand*. Discussing a device created by R R Winterbotham, 'Atheling' writes:

> "The fact that the model does not work should have been only a minor drawback -- after all, none of them do, and if science fictional models worked we should be up to our necks in anti-gravity and tractor beams by now; it could have been made to sound as if it worked." (18)

When we adopt such standards as these, we have obviously strayed far away from any rigorous of faithful adherence to scientific principles. Even 'speculation' is too restrictive a term; we have moved deep into the realm of fantasy. The function of science in this genre is not as a set of rules or guiding principles for constructing imaginary worlds and filling them with 'realistic' details, but rather as a rich and powerful stimulus to the writer's imagination -- an inspiring idea in the broadest sense.

(Turning these words around slightly, by the way, will yield the one-line definition of science fiction that has eluded those within the field for many years. Science fiction is fantasy that uses science as a source of ideas. (19) The reason this relationship has remained obscure for so long, it seems to me, has less to do with literature than with a cultural accident: the people who read Stanislaw Lem and Olaf Stapledon join different fan clubs from those who read Franz Kafka and William Morris. For a long time and for precisely opposite reasons, neither group wanted to acknowledge that science fiction has a legitimate place in Western literature.)

The science fiction writer constructs his imaginary world in precisely the same way as does the fantasy writer. Although he draws his inspiration -- both for the story he tells and the way he tells it -- from a discipline that adheres rigorously to observed facts, his own responsibility to those facts is no greater than was Kafka's when he wrote the opening lines of *Amerika*:

> "As Karl Rossman, a poor boy of sixteen who had been packed off to America by his parents because a servant girl had seduced him and got herself a child by him, stood on the liner slowly entering the harbour of New York, a sudden burst of sunshine seemed to illumine the Statue of Liberty, so that he saw it in a new light, although he had sighted it long before. The arm with the sword rose up as if newly stretched aloft, and round the figure blew the free winds of heaven." (20)

No realistic writer would even think of (deliberately) venturing so blatant a deviation from common knowledge. In modern fantasy, however, such audacity is not only permitted but required. The fantasist's first loyalty is not to fact but to the peculiar logic of his own imagination. The subject of *Amerika* is not the country which Kafka never visited many hundred miles from Prague, but that country as it exists as an adventure in the writer's mind. The subject of science fiction is not science, but the possibilities of science and the scientific future as they exist as adventures in writers' minds. The writer's task is not to observe science's restrictions, but to draw on its possibilities.

* * * * *

NOTES

1. John Brunner: The Genesis of "Stand On Zanzibar" and Digressions. Extrapolation vol. 11, no. 2, 1970, p. 37

2. Ibid., p. 36

3. Ibid., p. 35

4. Robert Scholes: Structural Fabulation. Notre Dame, Indiana, University of Notre Dame Press, 1975, p. 4

5. Ibid., p. 7

6. Ibid.

7. Jorge Luis Borges: "The Aleph," in Norman Thomas di Giovanni (editor and translator): The Aleph and Other Stories. New York, E.P. Dutton, 1978, pp. 15-30

8. Lewis Carroll: Sylvie and Bruno Concluded, in The Complete Works of Lewis Carroll. New York, Random House, p. 617

9. Reginald Bretnor: Introduction to Science Fiction Today and Tomorrow. Baltimore, Penguin Books, 1975, pp. vii-ix

10. Poul Anderson: The Creation of Imaginary Worlds, in Reginald Bretnor (editor): Science Fiction Today and Tomorrow. Baltimore, Penguin Books, 1975, pp. 235-257

11. The square-cube law says that as a creature's size increases, its strength will increase with the square of its linear dimensions, but its mass (and therefore weight) increases with the cube of the linear dimensions. Thus if, say, an ant were expanded to one hundred times its normal length with all its bodily proportions kept constant, it would become ten thousand times as strong as it was formerly--but it would be a million times as heavy, and would collapse of its own weight. With an ant's anatomy it would also, incidentally, be unable to keep its tissues supplied with oxygen or prevent a buildup of internal heat from disrupting the chemical processes in its cells. Which is why there are no giant ants.

12. Hal Clement: The Creation of Imaginary Beings, in Reginald Bretnor (editor): Science Fiction Today and Tomorrow. Baltimore, Penguin Books, 1975, pp. 259-275

13. Anderson, p. 252

14. Clement, p. 262

15. Brunner, p. 35

16. Howard Eves: An Introduction to the History of Mathematics, fourth edition. New York, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1976, pp. 415-418

17. Douglas R. Hofstedter: Godel, Escher, Bach: an Eternal Golden Braid. New York, Basic Books, 1979, p. 601

18. William Atheling, Jr.: More Issues at Hand. Chicago, Advent:Publishers, 1970, p. 94. William Atheling, Jr., is of course a pseudonym of James Blish.

19. I am using "fantasy" in its broad sense, as it is commonly perceived by English-speaking readers: fiction that is patently concerned with events that could not have happened in the world as we know it up to the present moment, because it postulates history, societies, technologies, or natural laws that we either know or are fairly sure have never existed. Some critics have taken the narrower view that in order for a story to qualify as fantasy the events portrayed must contradict the laws of nature as they are set forth in the story. While I find this a fascinating distinction to make, I cannot accept it as a comprehensive definition of fantasy. For one thing, it would exclude The Lord of the Rings but include The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test. For another, it fails to consider a form of fantasy in which new laws of nature are being discovered all the time.

20. Franz Kafka: Amerika (Edwin Muir, translator). New York, New Directions Publishing Corp., 1946, p. 3

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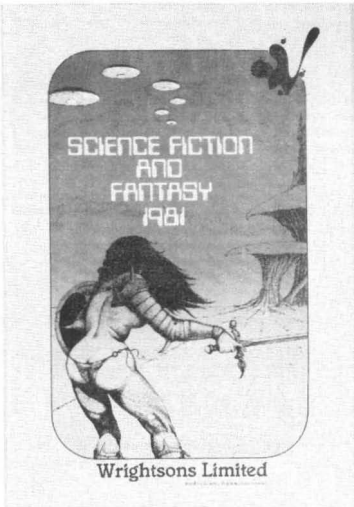

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REASSESSMENTS

BRIGHT WALLS OF THE UNIVERSE

Mary Gentle

Isaac Asimov's 'Nightfall' is established as a classic of science fiction. This short story has been repeatedly anthologised, dramatised, and is the subject of at least one LP recording; Asimov himself has said it is his best-known story. Undoubtedly most fans have read it -- but usually at the beginning of their career. It is, I would say, one of the landmark stories that are read in the early teens and then never afterwards re-examined, having become part of the hierarchy of classic works.

In SF, unfortunately, it's all too often a case of the Emperor's New Clothes; and it takes an adult viewpoint to perceive -- as a child does not -- that the garments of reputation are very threadbare rags indeed.

What should a story have to make it a classic? To be, as the dictionary has it, 'received into the accepted canons of excellence'? Ideally it should be a story that appeals to successive generations of readers. It should be more than competently written and characterised -- to be merely competent doesn't make it a classic -- and it should be original in conception. It should be open to many interpretations, and be capable of being re-read with increasing enjoyment as the reader matures. This is a lot to ask of any one story, but we're concerned not with the bad, the indifferent, or even the good; what concerns us is the excellent -- the classic.

And so how does 'Nightfall' measure up to these somewhat optimistic standards? It made its first appearance in September 1941, in *Astounding Science Fiction* -- Campbell the editor, Asimov the author: this places it firmly in the pulp tradition. The story begins:

> "Aton 77, director of Saro University, thrust out a belligerent lower lip and glared at the young newspaperman in a hot fury."

Now this might suit the New York of the 1940s, though it seems in atmosphere to fall between Philip Marlowe and 50s B-movies. Here we have the stock qualities of pulp SF. The numbered names -- Beenay 25, Theremon 762 -- are attached to cardboard characters. These are, in order of appearance, the Elderly Scientist, the Smartass Reporter, the Lab Assistant, the Psychologist (wily, but physically inept), the Mad Cultist, and -- offstage, where you'd expect to find the butchers, bakers and candlestickmakers who supply the motive power of the scientists' world -- the Raging Mob. The action takes place in the laboratory at Saro University, where an eclipse and the end of the world are imminent...

But hold on a minute -- this isn't Earth! No, this is Lagash; a world that's part of a six-sun system and so exists in eternal daylight under the suns Alpha, Beta, Gamma... well, you can fill the rest in yourself. We don't see this light, as all the suns but red Beta have set, and the action takes place indoors in a crepuscular crimson glow. What forces of convergent or parallel evolution are required to produce humanoids on this world aren't stated. What leads these humanoids to duplicate the written conventions of mid-twentieth century America is best left unexamined. So let's charitably imagine that this story, in which there features multi-chess, the Saro City *Chronicle*, and red wine, is translating unimaginable alienness into terms that humans can comprehend. What kind of story is unfolding on Lagash?

It opens with the Smartass Reporter gaining an interview with the Elderly Scientist -- someone has to carry the dramatic action, after all. The scientist, having been savaged by the media before, has no love for them, but allows the reporter to stay on account of the world is about to end, and the chances of his story seeing print are a little remote. This established, the reporter is taken aside by the psychologist for the first explanatory lecture.

Lagash's cyclic civilisation is presumed to be due to the once-in-2049-years eclipse of Beta by a hidden moon. Not a bad theory, this, and verging on the original. A civilisation that always has the light of at least one of its six suns -- what happens when the five set and the sixth is eclipsed? As the Emerson quotation which begins the story says: "If the stars should appear one night in a thousand years, how would men believe and adore, and preserve for many generations the remembrance of the city of God?" The result in this case is total chaos. The Lagashians, having a psychotic terror of darkness, fire their own cities for light; civilisation collapses to barbarism and the whole cycle begins over again. (Nine times: and they haven't invented the electric light yet... terminal stupidity would appear not to be confined to Earth.)

Theremon cannot bear a darkened room, Sheerin cannot enter caves; Lagash is a planet of claustrophobes. Technically advanced enough to make telescopes and other scientific instruments, when it comes to artificial light sources all they can manage are tallow candles. Not so much as an oil-lamp... which indicates that they have no cellars, no closed rooms; perhaps that they never sleep.

This would come across better if the first part of the story took place out of doors in blazing six-fold sunlight, not in a darkening room under the dusky light of a red sun. The images are less claustrophobic than agoraphobic, which fits in with Asimov's self-confessed image, but not with the rationale of this story. However...

Expecting imminent world destruction, the scientists have constructed a Hideout in which they expect to preserve knowledge and (naturally) scientists; or at least a scientific elite. The sole indication that Lagashians have more than a single gender comes here: included in the Hideout are "strong healthy women that can breed children". Poor biologically-handicapped race, whose females are equipped only for breeding, and not for such wonderful rational thoughts as produce these scientists! Scientists who, by the way, aren't making their observations from the Hideout or anywhere near it, but from the old University buildings a few miles from the cities that are about to go up in flames... A wonderful thing, rational thought.

What are Aton 77 and his fellow scientists hoping to observe and record? It seems the Cult legends from the last cycle mention things called Stars, that drive men mad. Asimov describes the scientists working out the existence of the moon (concealed by the light of six suns) and their speculations that there may actually be other suns in the universe, say as much as four light years away, only visible when the six suns' light is quenched. These scenes have a sly and very appealing charm, and enable the reader to feel totally superior; which, after all, is what it's all about.

So, night draws on apace... Reporter and Psychologist try experiments with darkened rooms; are interrupted by a Luddite Cultist, who quite naturally objects to having his religious revelations explained away by science, said Cultist being blackmailed into holding his peace by the Psychologist. (Nice moral footwork there.) And just in time to pick up a slackening plot, there's a chip in the side of Beta and the eclipse is under way...

The climax of 'Nightfall' is worth examining in detail. In the beseiged lab -- torches flaring, cameras poised -- the scientists wait while the mob tears at the gates, and the last light fades. Then darkness comes, seen through the eyes of Theremon 77:

> "With the slow fascination of fear, he lifted himself on one arm and turned his eyes toward the blood-curdling blackness of the window.
>
> "Through it shone the Stars!
>
> "Not Earth's feeble thirty-six hundred Stars visible to the naked eye; Lagash was in the centre of a giant cluster. Thirty thousand mighty suns shone down in a soul-searing splendour that was more frighteningly cold in its awful indifference than the bitter wind that shivered across the cold, horribly bleak world."

There is power in that vision. Asimov has reached down and tapped the fear of every child who was ever in terror of the dark. Ignoring the clumsy writing, pulp plot, cardboard characters and multiple adjectives, 'Nightfall' has at its core this single image.

> "The bright wall of the universe were shattered and their awful black fragments were falling down to crush and squeeze and obliterate him."

This is bad writing, but all the same: it works. In the same way that H P Lovecraft, with the same faults, could tap into cosmic fear: it works [illegible] since Lovecraft was a fantasy writer, leads me to ask how and why it works.

> "On the horizon outside the window, in the direction of Saro City, a crimson glow began growing, strengthening in brightness. That was not the glow of a sun.
>
> "The long night had come again."

It is only this single apocalyptic image that has kept 'Nightfall' off the junkheap, out of the well-deserved oblivion of the Hackwriters' Graveyard. Style and content wouldn't have done it: only this.

But this is supposed to be SF, and SF implies science, and science implies rational thought. This isn't rational, this great world-destruction; this is myth, this is legend, this is the subconscious and not the conscious mind that's being used.

Because what, in the end, is Asimov saying? Surely not: 'There are things man was not meant to know'. That hoary old chestnut is too non-scientific. So what does it say, this apocalypse?

It says: there are some things it won't matter if you know -- you can't do anything about them. It says: you live comfortably in a little world of falsehoods. It says: when you discover, once and for all, the true qualities of the universe, the shape of reality, it will drive you irrevocably insane. Science here debunks the Cultists' revelations, to find the truth is far more terrible than their imaginings. It says: there <u>are</u> things man was not meant to know -- because he will go mad when he learns them.

And there's a nice, rational, scientific world-view for a 'classic' of science fiction.

****

'G A L A C T I C C L U S T E R' David Penn

Of the six stories in this collection of James Blish's stories, five are badly flawed and one is not.

'A Work of Art' is a story which has dramatic excellence, whose central character, Richard Strauss, is quite plausibly drawn, and whose theme -- of the special relative nature of art -- is explored in a balanced and natural way within the logical progression of the events of the story. The 'resurrected' Strauss can only repeat his old formulas, though he tries to create something revolutionary again, and the result is only a hollow imitation of himself. The times have changed and relegated the genius of his originality to its niche in the past. Yet art, having moved on, is art nonetheless; but now the real work of art is 'Strauss' himself, who turns out to be a recreation of Strauss made by a form of hypnosis exercised over an already living personality. Music in itself is virtually dead, but mind-sculpting is very much alive. The story has a pattern, it is not a mere exhibition of symbols, flung together under the thin disguise of a 'plot'. The plot is as sturdy as the theme, and the two interconnect and complement each other. There is skill in the story's construction.

Unfortunately, that is not the case with 'Common Time' or 'Beep'. The former has as its subject something that Philip K Dick (as well as William Blake) has quite often written about, and that is the subjectivity of existence. We believe in ourselves absolutely, in our perception of the pace of time, the duration of 'now', and in our own inviolable identity. However, 'me' 'now' is not really absolute, but is subject to change. In this story, Blish, in common with Dick, suggests that the breakdown of me-now may be the greatest liberating experience man can encounter. However, man's self-centredness and tunnelled vision of time prevents him from joining the infinite.

This is a grand theme. And as Arthur C Clarke has proven time and again, the best way to handle a grand theme is not to illustrate it wholesale, and then glory in one's own illustration. Unfortunately, this is exactly what Blish does. We are told in detail what it is like for an astronaut's subjective time-sense to be mucked about with, then treated to him meeting an alien who has transcended the 'I' barrier. Thus two direct representations of the theme are introduced, then the story winds back to square one -- the astronaut goes home. Very little happens: the story is too obviously a mere vehicle for bringing a particular idea to its readers. There are no characters to speak of, only an astronaut to experience these realisations of abstract notions, and an old commander to talk over his adventure with on his return, who also represents crabby old humanity by saying no to the wonder of it all. The depthlessness of the astronaut at least is inexcusable: since the story shows how his loss of personality enables him to gain oneness of being with the infinite, then perhaps Blish could have actually given the astronaut a personality which he might lose.

In 'Beep' the idea is that all events happen because they have happened and will happen. Time is a territory with unchangeable features. Even our prior knowledge of events cannot change them, and people are merely the hapless passengers of the inevitability of things.

To introduce us to this idea, Blish presents a series of flat characters who could have been lifted from any Heinlein work, for the purpose of having them meet together to discuss it. Of course most of the story is talk, even though it is set against a background of espionage and intrigue. This intrigue itself pretends to nothing except to provide the machinations which enable all the talk to take place. The story exists to nudge its readers towards the discussion in which the concept underlying the story is revealed. Admittedly, the discussions reveal other facets of the theme: for instance, that a government that had access to a future that was preordained could do nothing but watch, and thus would not actually govern at all. But still the accent is on the mere presentation of an idea.

So the striking thing about these stories is their extreme narrowness of interest. Neither character, subtlety and depth of imagery, poetry of language, nor symmetricality of plot have any place in them, but only the idea which is presented -- it is that, and only that, which is the functioning creative element. Neither story properly serves as an aesthetically pleasing whole, but only as a frame for an idea, and it is the idea which is meant to stand or fall on its originality, and to be the measure of the story. What seems to be operating on Blish's writing consciousness in the stories is the assumption that science fiction readers will be so stunned by the brilliance of his central ideas that the fact that there is very little else of interest in them will pale into insignificance. Consequently, all the artifice and skill of the fiction writer gives way to the direct brainstorming of the philosopher.

Elsewhere, Blish comes close to creating another complete story (besides 'A Work of Art'). A third of the way through 'Beanstalk' I had begun to think that this was perhaps a later story, wherein he had junked the direct lecturing of 'Beep' and 'Common Time'. The story may have been an attempt to do that, but Blish seems to have been unable to fulfil its early promise. He lapses into an aimless punch-up of almost van Vogtian silliness.

The theme of 'Beanstalk' is that of the narrow-mindedness of racial jealousy. The feelings of giants produced by genetic experimentation are dealt with insightfully and with imagination. The relationships of the characters, in the first part of the story, create a naturally changing pattern of events and thus an organically building, uncontrived plot. The themes emerge quite logically from a satisfying whole. But this sensitive portrayal of alienation then descends first into a just bearable Perry Mason court scene, and then, incredibly, into the above mentioned bundle. The hero, Sam, dons spectacular armour to chase after the megalomaniac baddie, Maury, who has gone off with his girl. Sam beats Maury and makes him look silly, and Maury is left to express his distaste for defeat in the immortal last words, "I'll kill you all."

I can't deny that, in the words of the official lore, Blish re-examined the old themes of science fiction, in these stories, with his more intense and profound light. As far as the further exploration of science fiction ideas goes, *Galactic Cluster* has it in abundance; but as a contribution to fiction in something like a literary spirit, wherein things besides mind-boggling themes count, on the whole it leaves a lot to be desired. I feel that we see here a Blish who is trying to bring some greater importance to his science fiction, but is not quite sure how to do it. His answer in 'Beep' and 'Common Time' is to plump for mere stringency of intellectual content. Where he almost succeeds in combining depth of idea with an aesthetically pleasing story, he seems to tumble the other way, into an overriding concern for action and plot. This can be seen in 'Nor Iron Bars' and 'To Pay the Piper' as well as 'Beanstalk'.

There is that single exception, which is 'A Work of Art'.

However, if the collection be judged as a whole, then it must be noted that five of the six stories do not stand of themselves as complete works of fiction. Their place in, if you like, the 'history of science fiction' may lie in their experimental air of stretching science fiction's intellectual capacity. But as far as examples of good literature, in or outside the genre, go, most of the stories in *Galactic Cluster* fall very short of the mark.

(*Galactic Cluster* by James Blish, published by Granada.)

****

The foot remained where it was, drawn back lethal, loaded, deadly.

'THE PASTEL CITY' John Hobson

> "...war alone brings up to their human tension all human energies and puts the stamp of nobility upon the peoples who have the courage to meet it."
>
> "A pikeman tore a long strip of flesh from the neck of his mount; Cromis hung out of the saddle and swung for the carotid artery; blade bit, and splashed with the piker's gore the horse reared and screamed in triumph. Cromis hung on and cut about him laughing. The stink of horse-sweat and leather and blood was as sharp as a knife."

The first of the above quotes is from Mussolini, while the second, its corollary, is from *The Pastel City* by M John Harrison (recently reissued by Timescape), such a cliched piece of sword-and-sorcery that it may well have misled Harrison apologists (most notably in the Nicholls *Encyclopedia*) into looking for supposedly hidden depths. Sadly, there are none, and instead we are faced with yet another thinly disguised tract on behalf of fascism.

The plot can be quickly dismissed. A feudalistic world is divided into two halves, with the evil Queen of the North, aided by an army of brain-sucking robots, attacking the more progressive South. The Southern armies are routed, but their Queen, a seventeen year old, is rescued by the inevitable band of battling heroes. They escape, meet a greybearded scientist who lives in a tower and then -- But need one pursue formula plotting any further? The book has all the hallmarks of a hurried hack job, which means that it is short and that the prose is second-hand, doubtless in the belief that the prospective reader is so familiar with the themes and tropes of the sword-and-sorcery genre that he can easily fill in the blanks. The characters are like shadows, fleeting across a background of purple void: sexless, humourless murderers who exist only from one inevitable battle to the next. Only Lord tegeus-Cromis receives the slightest shade of humanity, and how can one take seriously a person who, when faced with tension, begins "to caress the pommel of the nameless sword"?

What is so abhorrent about books of this ilk is their blind acceptance that might makes right, that character is formed by buckling on a scabbard, that only military victory makes one a true man, and -- since these works seem always to be set in feudalistic dreamlands -- that only in a military society can all this come to pass. Exactly what Mussolini was preaching: and not once in *The Pastel City* does Harrison ever question the morality of what he is writing. He accepts without a murmur the stereotypical conventions of sword-and-sorcery fiction: the repressed homosexuality, the overt militarism, the bloodlust; the heroes walk unscathed, both physically and mentally, from every battle (except, eventually, Cromis, who is excluded from the final victory) because only warriors are fit to found and maintain a society... indeed, the North is finally defeated by reborn warriors.

I don't think that it would be too strong to say that the publication of this book reinforces the type of thinking which led to Auschwitz and which is still alive today in Southall. To defend this book as part of Harrison's overall work is no excuse -- a bad book by a good author is still a bad book -- any more than the adherents of Oi music can play Pilate and say that it has no effect: its existence is enough, and anyone who thinks that war is some kind of Wayne-type fun should read either Keagan's *The Face of Battle* or Ellis's *The Sharp End of War*, in the latter of which can be found this quote from a World War 2 GI:

> "Before you woke up, two of their guys (grave diggers) had been poking around looking for the body of some captain that got it here yesterday. Later on they got an empty (rations) box from us. What they found of him went off in that." (p.114)

Now re-read the opening two quotations and make up your own mind.

STANDPOINT

THE PEOPLE FOR SF

Colin Greenland

With all due respect to someone who says nice things about me in *Ansible*, Dave Langford's brave attempt last issue to make a good case for the *Lego Book of the Future* -- the 21st Century dismantled into easy-assemble plastic blocks and delivered to your door -- could not disguise the essential meanness of the proposition. Stories neatly perforated at the two thousand word mark, slid in edgeways between articles on cybernetic mousetraps and sensurround wallpaper? Even at two thousand words a week, the fiction will be only medium-grade filler, decorative relief for the squeaky-clean surfaces of Tomorrow. What we need is a magazine that takes fiction seriously, seriously enough to pay authors the best possible rates and so ensure their best possible work; seriously enough to offer readers the most stimulating, best-written work available, without crushing it into some preconceived marketable package. The idea is simple. All it needs is an editorial team alert and experienced enough to produce a professional magazine that won't collapse from inflated idealism, and committed enough to do it for the sake of the fiction alone.

The team is John Clute, Alan Dorey, Malcolm Edwards, Colin Greenland, Graham James, Roz Kaveney, Simon Ounsley and David Pringle. The magazine is *Interzone*. It will appear quarterly from February 1982, and be dedicated to publishing the best in imaginative fiction. Readers of *Vector* all know that starts with SF. We also all know, I hope, that it doesn't end there. As Brian Aldiss says: "All good science fiction hovers on the verge of being something other than science fiction." The sort of writers we are talking about are Brian Aldiss, J G Ballard, Barrington J Bayley, John Crowley, M John Harrison, Michael Moorcock, John Sladek -- writers who have responded positively to the announcement of *Interzone*, and whom we intend to feature in its first issues. We're also talking about new writers, and will be publishing the best of them too. In my first year working in creative writing at the N E London Poly's SF Foundation, I've met young writers who feel they're in a vacuum. Some of them have done punk SF for fanzines, *Ludd's Mill*, the sort of thing John Hobson was encouraging in *Vector* 101, but they're not developing their work further because there isn't a place for it. *Interzone* is the place. Submissions -- of the very best quality -- to Malcolm Edwards, 28 Duckett Road, London N4 1BN, or to David Pringle, 21 The Village Street, Leeds LS4 2PR. The usual stipulations (see Dave Langford's piece last issue -- thank you, Dave) about format and s.a.e.'s apply, of course.

Interzone has been thoroughly costed, and the estimates thoroughly argued about. They are workable. None of the editorial collective will be making a penny out of the magazine, so all its income will be available for production costs and paying contributors. What we do need is audience support. An extraordinary wealth of energy and enthusiasm goes into producing fanzines and running cons. It's about time that fandom in general and the BSFA in particular had the opportunity to channel some of that directly towards promoting the fiction we're all supposed to be so keen on. The Yorcon 2 committee has made a good start by voting the magazine some of this year's funds. If you like the sound of *Interzone*, don't hang about: support it now, by taking out an advance subscription. The economics of magazine publishing are such that one subscriber is worth two casual buyers. The more you put in at this stage, the better the magazine you'll be getting. And as if a new top quality fiction magazine weren't incentive enough in itself, we're negotiating two bonuses. First, BSFA members will be able to take advantage of a special reduction: four pounds instead of five for a year's subscription. That will be officially announced elsewhere in this mailing. Secondly, everyone who subscribes before the end of 1981, whether a BSFA member or not, will receive a special limited edition booklet of a new novella by J G Ballard: more details as soon as they're fixed.

It's happening, so get on now: subscribe to *Interzone*, 28 Duckett Road, London N4 1BN.

Interzone. The border is open.

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bsfa AWARD

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Award administrator: Joseph Nicholas, Room 9, 94 St George's Sq, Pimlico, London, SW1V 3QY.

Book Reviews

Reviews Editor: Joseph Nicholas

Christopher Priest -- THE AFFIRMATION (Faber & Faber, 213 pp, £6.25)

Reviewed by Joseph Nicholas

"All good SF," Brian Aldiss once said,"hovers on the verge of being something other than SF" -- a remark quoted by Christopher Priest in his editorial introduction to his 1978 anthology *Anticipations*, and as a doctrine it is one that he seems to have taken increasingly to heart, his each successive novel moving further and further away from what a genre purist would recognise as science fiction... to the extent that his latest novel, *The Affirmation*, can hardly be said to be SF at all. (Indeed, it isn't even marketed as such; only in the mention of his other works on the rear jacket flap does the label appear.) Yet it shares with certain of his previous novels -- *Indoctrinaire*, *Inverted World* and *A Dream of Wessex* -- a concern for what might be termed the subjective nature of reality, the way in which our senses doctor our perceptions of the world about us to the point where we can no longer tell where the illusion ends or even whether it has an end at all. This is a theme which has of course obsessed Philip K Dick for most of his career, but the essential difference between his and Priest's work is that, whereas in Dick's the characters can perceive the alterations in the fabric of the universe about them, and either strive to return it to what it was or readapt to it as it has become, in Priest's the characters are incapable of such perception, and are indeed virtually helpless to control or comprehend what happens to them as a result.

The Affirmation's protagonist is one Peter Sinclair, a moderately comfortable

and in some ways rather complacent 29-year-old who, as the novel opens, has just experienced a series of personal disasters: his father has died, his girlfriend has left him, he has been given notice to quit by his new landlord and has been made redundant by his employers. Needing time to think, to work out what to do with his life, he arranges with an old friend of his father's to stay temporarily in the cottage the friend has just bought in Herefordshire, his 'rent' being the renovating and redecorating it needs to make it habitable. Having moved in, however, Sinclair discovers that such work alone is not enough, and resolves to write the story of his life to date, to set down on paper a detailed record of the events that have made him what he is; but having done so, he realises that by itself this is insufficient: "To deal with myself I had to treat myself with greater objectivity, to examine myself in the way the protagonist is examined in a novel. A described life is not the same as a real one. Living is not an art, but to write of life is. Life is a series of accidents and anticlimaxes, misremembered and misunderstood, with lessons only dimly learned. Life is disorganised, lacks shape, lacks story." (page 17) He therefore embarks on a second draft, seeking to re-order his material into a coherent form, discarding chronological exactitude in favour of narrative ease -- "Truth was being served at the expense of literal fact, but it was a higher, better form of truth" (page 22) -- only to discover that this, too, is insufficient: "I knew exactly how my story must be told. If the deeper truth could only be told by falsehood -- in other words, through metaphor -- then to achieve total truth I must create total falsehood. My manuscript had to become a metaphor for myself." (page 23) And so he embarks on a third version, one set in imaginary country where his friends and relatives have been given new names and new identities -- and suddenly we too are plunged into this imaginary world, the landscape of which has already been made partly known to us through such stories as 'The Watched' and 'The Negation': the Dream Archipelago.

In this secondary story, Peter Sinclair, an inhabitant of Jethra in the country of Faiandland, has won a lottery to visit the island of Collago and receive a course of treatment called 'athanasia', a process which will render him biologically immortal. As he journeys by ship through some of the many thousands of islands which make up the Archipelago, caught helplessly in the grip of the lottery's organisational machinery, he begins to experience severe doubts about the worth of the prize, about the disruption that it has caused to his life, about his own suitability for the treatment, but is counselled throughout by one Seri Fulten, an employee of the Lotterie-Collago organisation who has elected to travel with him and with whom he feels himself to be falling in love.

And then, just as suddenly, we are back in our world, in the house of Sinclair's sister, Felicity, in Sheffield, she having come to 'rescue' him from his cottage retreat and the squalor into which he, without realising it, had fallen. After a chance meeting with his former lover, Gracia, he returns to London with her -- and to the ship taking him on to Collago where, when he reaches it, he reveals to Seri that he has earlier written down on paper the story of his life to date: the story of a Peter Sinclair who once lived in London, whose father had just died, whose girlfriend had just left him... the story, in fact, of the Peter Sinclair of our world, the one whom we had supposed to be the 'real' one. Re-reading it, he realises that "The manuscript confirmed what I had known all along, that my attempt to reach a higher, better truth had been successful. The metaphors lived, and my identity was defined amongst them." (page 107)

The question of his identity is one that now assumes paramount importance, for a side-effect of the athanasia treatment is the complete erasure of the subject's memories, which have to be built up again afterwards from information furnished to the clinic by means of their detailed questionnaire. Refusing to complete the questionnaire, he hands them instead his manuscript -- and in consequence, of course, his life collapses in a welter of unresolvable confusions, contradictions, inaccuracies, falsehoods, tangled memories: whether in

London or on the island of Collago, he can no longer tell the difference between them, the images, personalities and locations of one interpenetrating and intermeshing with those of the other. Has he escaped from the clinic and is now wandering the islands with Seri, trying to find a way back to London and Gracia, or is he already in London, trying to re-establish his relationship with Gracia while pursuing the ghost of Seri through its darkened streets? He has only his manuscript to guide him, but in our world it seems to consist only of blank paper; in the Dream Archipelago, however, he presumes the blanks between the lines of his story to contain the truth about himself, a statement of what the future may hold; but what this future may be we cannot tell, for the novel ends with him having sailed back into the port of Jethra in search of London, hanging on the uncompleted sentence: "For a moment I thought I knew where I was, but when I looked back" (page 213).

In many respects, this is a novel of madness, of the creeping and ultimately irreversible inability to distinguish between the real and the imaginary which afflicts Peter Sinclair; but it is equally a work of autobiography, and not merely in the sense that all novels are autobiographical because a writer is defined, and defines himself, by his works. *The Affirmation* can be said to deal with the problems of distinguishing between the real and the imaginary that must -- although this is not at all to suggest that he suffers from the same madness as his protagonist -- afflict Priest, and indeed all novelists, every time he and they sit down at their typewriters, not least because it is, through its device of the novel-within-the-novel, about writing, and in particular about the act of subcreation that all SF writers engage in as a matter of routine. Which of course prompts the question: how much belief do they invest in the 'reality' of what they invent? It would be easy to claim that the Dream Archipelago represents, for Priest, some sort of idealised world in which he would like to live; but this would be false, because does not the very word 'Dream' suggest the distance at which he holds it? Besides, when reviewing Joan Vinge's *The Snow Queen* in the May 1981 issue of *F & SF*, he said of this practice of 'worldcraft': "No one can write this sort of novel without running into a major creative difficulty. In a described world of a remote future, or of a remote part of the universe, the author will be imaginatively isolated from the very forces which made him or her into a writer: language, nation, culture, art, myth, slang, scenery, history, folklore, etc. This is a problem that can sometimes be solved by simply ignoring it (e.g. in the *Star Wars* movies), but Vinge is an intelligent and conscientious writer and has I think appreciated the difffculty. The people of another world, when described as a coherent part of that world, would possess such an intangible underlay of assumptions, recognitions and cultural shorthand that any attempt at capturing it must be doomed. (And never mind the insuperable problem of having to write the book in English.) The twin traps for the author are banality and incomprehensibility, and the most demanding imaginative task inherent in writing this kind of novel is finding a safe line between them. In some ways the very size and importance of the problem might make the 'worldcraft' type of novel congenitally unwritable, at least by serious novelists." In these terms, then (although it can be used as the basis of a general case against the imaginative endeavour of almost all fiction, and thus comes dangerously close to a wholesale denunciation of it), such subcreation is pointless, because the invented world will resemble the real one to such a degree as to make it but an extension of it rather than a thing apart -- and in respect of most SF, such worlds are usually doctored extensions of it, with certain unpleasant elements being suppressed and other, more pleasant ones being enhanced. This is certainly the case with *The Affirmation*, in which Sinclair's run of misfortune in our world is counterpointed by his luck in winning the lottery in the Dream Archipelago one -- not to mention the way in which the Archipelago's idyllic atmosphere of perpetual summer counterpoints the grey workaday dullness of our own -- and the novel can thus be read, in effect, on the same level as *A Dream of Wessex*: as a commentary on the nature of SF, and on the way in which its less

demanding, more 'irresponsible' practitioners attempt to pretend the fears and frustrations of the real world out of existence. Which of course makes the title wonderfully ironic, for it affirms nothing more than that fiction is a lie, and that those who write it are the grandest liars of all.

But this is only one possible interpretation of the novel, and it may not be the correct one, assuming that there is any 'correct' one; like a set of Russian dolls, where the opening of one discloses another nestling within, itself containing another which..., one could continue digging into it for yet more interpretations almost forever. What is certain about it is its style, a measured, cadenced, in some ways restrained, but always lyrical prose that at times borders on the poetic but is never less than a joy to read, not least because each word is so well chosen that one can see immediately in one's mind exactly what is being described. Images fairly leap from the page, and to choose any one passage over another is rather invidious; but here, with exhilerating precision, Priest describes the taxi in which Sinclair rides through the streets of Muriseay Town:

> "It was a huge, battered old saloon, spattered with dust and dried mud, the windscreen plastered with dead insects. Inside, the seats were covered with synthetic fur, and were far too soft for comfort; one sank into them with a feeling of excessive and cloying luxury. The fascia of the car was tarnished chrome and peeling wood veneer; the inside of the windscreen was stuck all over with photographs of women and children. A dog lay asleep on the back seat, and shrilling, distorted pop music was blasting from the radio. The driver steered with only one hand on the wheel, the other out of the window and clasping the roof, slapping in time with the music. The car swooped through corners, setting up a banging noise from the suspension and a rocking motion inside."
> (pages 56-57)

The Affirmation is without doubt Priest's finest work to date, a brilliant and sustained novel of imaginative power. I have no hesitation whatsoever in commending it to you as one of the best SF novels that I have read and, indeed, as one of the best novels of the year.

Monica Hughes - THE KEEPER OF THE ISIS LIGHT (Magnet, 136pp, 95p)
THE GUARDIAN OF ISIS (Hamish Hamilton, 140pp, £5.25)

Reviewed by Ann Collier

Reading the opening pages of The Keeper of the Isis Light, I wondered whether it would be possible to comment on this children's book without being patronising. There was a good enough "Are you sitting comfortably?" beginning - good enough, that is for children. But, doubting whether children really are content with inferior standards I abandoned such condescension. What follows are the responses of an (allegedly) adult reader.

Olwen Pendennis, (whose ancestral literary namesakes were surely the heroines of numerous tales of pony club gymkhanas) an adolescent girl - her only companions Guardian, an all but human robot, and a "pet" indigenous dragon - has spent all her life on Isis, enjoying the uncontaminated beauty of this planetary Garden of Eden and transmitting to Earth via the "Light" information about its suitability for settlement. Inevitably, since we are so warned in the very first line, this idyll is soon shattered by the arrival of the first settlers from Earth and Olwen, forced to share her playground planet, has to struggle with the frustrating realisation that the universe was not created for her pleasure alone. However, those elements which suggest this will be a simple, "juvenile" story of Olwen's reluctant socialisation prove to be not a lack of originality on Monica Hughes's part but a careful and persuasive deception. Olwen's pet

and her squabbles with Guardian about allowing it into the house, her excitement at her birthday party, the general domesticity are intended to lull us into believing that, despite her environment and upbringing, Olwen is an ordinary girl. (I wondered whether her frightfully debby speech mannerism, somehow very reminiscent of girls ballet school stories, was also a calculated element in this deception, but was swayed by some embarrassingly coy boy-meets-girl dialogue later in the novel to the conclusion that the author's ear is not attuned to contemporary idiom.) Overtones of mystery are introduced as it is increasingly hinted that all is not as it seems. The settlers have to stay in the valleys to avoid danger from the intense ultra-violet radiation but Olwen, mistress of her domain, goes everywhere without difficulty. Guardian's apparently autocratic insistence on her wearing a special suit to protect her from infection by the settlers' germs inhibits her first contact with them and, in particular, with Mark London, with whom she falls instantly in love. Thinking herself alone on a high plateau, she removes the suit to enjoy the warmth of the sun on her skin but Mark (narrowly surviving a perilous patch of purple prose) happens to see her and, as if in punishment for her sensuousness and his voyeurism, the course of their lives is drastically changed. This moment, whose suddenness jolts the reader, makes the end of a secure and carefree childhood and the beginning of the growth towards maturity, which turbulent and painful process is central to both books. The reader is invited to sympathise with her agonised acceptance of the impossibility of a relationship with Mark and with her retreat to an isolated upland valley, but to be partially consoled by Guardian's accompanying her. My response to this invitation was muted because of Ms. Hughes's ambivalent portrayal of Guardian. To lend credibility to Olwen's ability to make relationships in the absence of human contact since childhood, Guardian is depicted as almost human, sufficiently so to deceive Olwen. He thinks of treats to please her and enjoys her delighted reactions, he has cared for her all her life and it is suggested at several points that their relationship is one of great mutual affection. Although Ms. Hughes gives no indication that she intended it to be so, Guardian is Mark's rival and his presence in Olwen's retreat diminishes its tragic dimensions.

The didactic purpose of this novel is, thankfully, achieved through the unfolding of the story rather than by direct preaching at the reader or by having characters who are mere mouthpieces for the author's views but, even so, there is occasional clumsiness about how this is done. The killing of Olwen's pet for example is a too explicit warning of the dangers facing her. Far less explicit is any acknowledgement of the adolescent heroine's dawning sexuality. Admittedly (to break my own rule), this is a children's book and expressions of sexual desire or activity may be considered inappropriate, but the romantic novel coyness is irritating. If the book concerns abandoning childhood myths and grappling painfully with the complexities of adult life, then this coyness is a disappointing evasion.

Keeper deals with the consequences of a community's fear of an outsider. The sequel, The Guardian Of Isis, explores how and why a community creates its own outsider, the formulation of social laws and the treatment of those who question and disobey them. This serious subject matter is tailored to appear to children by having a child hero, Jody, grandson of one of the first settlers, whose life Olwen saved. Three generations on, the settlers' community has become fossilised under the leadership of Mark London, now an old man. Never having come to terms with his guilt and anger at initially rejecting and then being rejected by Olwen, he is an embittered and tyrannical figure who deliberately fosters superstitious, anti-scientific beliefs and keeps women in subordinate roles. Machines have become taboo; creature comforts and sophisticated culture have disappeared. Legend has established Guardian as a divinely omnipotent being who must be appeased by sacrifices, a myth whose persistence relies on Guardian and Olwen's continued isolation in a remote valley. It is immediately evident that Jody, the child, will alone be able to save this society from the closed-mindedness of its adult

members. Always different from his peers, he has an enquiring and methodical mind and commits the ultimate sin; refusing just to accept conventional wisdom, he wants to understand and thus makes the transition from belief in magic to rationality, or, as in Keeper, from childlike confidence to adult uncertainty. Unsurprisingly, this prophet is not recognised in his own country and a pretext is found by Mark for sending Jody on a perilous mission, overtly to seek Guardian's help in preventing flooding in the valley but, in reality, hoping that he will not return. Paralleling Olwen's metaphysical quest, also as an outcast, this journey and meeting with Guardian enables Jody to put aside the years of belief in her as a malevolent destroyer of life. Finally, it is the collaboration of Olwen's and Guardian's wisdom and concern for the settlers and Jody's physical courage which saves the valley from flooding and provides and implicit refutation of Mark's dismissal as valueless of the young and elderly.

Jody's function in this book is a conventional one in children's literature. Compensating the reader for being comparatively powerless in an adult world, the child hero survives unpopularity and tribulation to emerge as the saviour - "that'll teach them to treat me like a kid!". Somewhat less conventional are Jody's African origins, his black skin being actually advantageous in making him less vulnerable to ultra-violet radiation. The climax is an all-action, underwater dynamiting sequence and the book ends almost abruptly several pages later on an optimistic note. Although few problems will be solved immediately, there is a confident assertion that under Jody's leadership, progress will be made. Unlike Guardian and Olwen, Jody comes back from the wilderness choosing reintegration into the community rather than individual salvation.

These books deal with complex issues - how do we treat that which we find threatening in its strangeness, how personal tragedy can be the rationalisation for cruel and autocratic behaviour, how communities become so stagnant that they are unable to make use of their own natural and intellectual resources, which then become lost forever. But they cannot be deprecated as merely worthy, earnest and responsible, because of the skilled story-telling through which the issues are presented. Ms. Hughes's descriptions of Isis and of Olwen, the unobtrusive exposition which allows Guardian to be read independently of Keeper, the narrative pace, and the dramatic presentation of the action and adventure elements are too accomplished to be seen purely as sugar coating on the pill of didacticism. Any parent spending sleepless nights worrying that too much E E 'Doc' Smith will inhibit their offspring's intellectual and cultural development need look no further for an alternative than these books, which can be relied upon to encourage the formation of good SF habits. Hell! Condescension sneaked up on me right at the end.

Philip K Dick - THE DIVINE INVASION (Timescape, 238pp, $12.95)

Reviewed by Paul Kincaid

Philip K Dick is not exactly the most predictable of writers, nor is he the most consistent. But at his best he is certainly one of the most challenging and exciting. In THE DIVINE INVASION he is pretty close to his best.

VALIS was a difficult, puzzling book because he was exploring concepts that were grand even by his standards. Having worked out the theory, the ground rules, he can now produce the story to go with it; and in THE DIVINE INVASION he has produced the sort of wide-ranging novel that is his hallmark, a virtuoso display of startling ideas, vivid characters and impish humour.

I suppose, in retrospect, that after VALIS something like this was inevitable. Yet it was far from predictable, for he has used VALIS as a springboard from which to launch himself into even more daring, not to say outlandish, areas. He has taken the basic premise of VALIS, that God is deranged, and twisted it round. God was driven from earth at the time of Masada and since then the

devil has ruled. God, in the meantime, has taken up residence on an obscure planet in the CY30-CY30B system. In neighbouring domes on this planet live Herb Asher and Rybys. God impregnates Rybys and manoevres Herb into marrying her; then the two of them, accompanied by the prophet Elijah, return to Earth. Thus they smuggle the son of God past the watchdogs of Belial, the ruling alliance of the Catholic Church and the communist party. There is an accident, Rybys is killed, Herb is put into cryogenic suspension, and Emmanuel is born with brain damage and loss of memory, and in that state must prepare for the ultimate battle with Belial.

It is a scenario that only Dick could have concocted, because only he has the gall. And of course that is precisely why he gets away with it. That, and the way he never lets the outlandish get out of hand. There is always a touch of identifiable ordinariness that keeps it all, somehow, within the bounds of believability. Herb Asher is one of his most fallible and most credible creations - the relationship with Rybys that never quite works for either of them, the laziness and self-centredness that make him reluctant to obey God's commands, and above all the hero-worship of the singer Linda Fox that becomes a genuine love that is to save his soul. It is Asher that allows us to accept the appearance of God as a ten-year-old with amnesia, though again this is a clever creation. By His nature God, perhaps, never works totally as a character in fiction - even Golding was unable to make the saintly innocent of DARKNESS VISIBLE into a credible person, and once omnipotence and omniscience were added the task became impossible. But by making his God imperfect Dick has neatly circumvented the problem and so succeeds better than most.

The basic story alone would be enough to satisfy most novelists, but Dick can never resist throwing that extra spanner into the works. In his cryogenic sleep Herb Asher is haunted by music broadcast by a nearby radio station. The events on CY30-CY30B are shown in flashback by way of his dreams, in which the music plays a real part. Herb later finds himself shifted into an alternative time-stream, with disturbing memories of his former life breaking through. In part this demonstrates the power of God and His adversary, but it also raises once more Dick's perennial questions about reality.

I suppose it is too much to hope that a book which builds so intimately upon VALIS - and one critic has even suggested that THE DIVINE INVASION should be read as written by the Phil Dick who was a fictional character in VALIS - should have completely shaken off all the worst characteristics of its predecessor. THE DIVINE INVASION, indeed, is awash with esoteric references to the Talmud and suchlike - Dick's God is very much the Old Testament God of the Jews. However, he has at least got the balance better, the references are more evenly distributed throughout the book, and it is Dick the storyteller rather than Dick the religious inquirer who is very definitely in control.

It is the ending of the book with which I am least happy, because it seems to me something of a cop-out. Despite the Talmudic references, Dick has, throughout the book, been playing fast and loose with our established conception of God. He is clearly building up to an epic confrontation between God and Belial, but at the last moment this does not take place. Instead we are blandly informed that it is a choice that every individual must make for himself. This may solve the problem of naming a winner, and it may sit more easily with a belief in the primacy of the individual conscience, but it does run counter to the thrust of the novel up to this point.

Still, such quibbles apart, it is nice to be able to commend an excellent novel by an excellent writer.

"The melbar instantaneous transmitter," answered Knights, "is not functioning. So we're like a blind man lost in a desert without a camel..."

Brian Stableford - WAR GAMES (Pan, 205pp, £1.50)

Reviewed by Chris Bailey

Brian Stableford's War Games makes extensive use of an idea which has occupied SF writers for a long time, that of our galaxy having been "seeded" in the distant past by some unknown and long-extinct race of genetic experimenters. One upshot of this is that the author's universe can become entirely populated with humanoid races and then, when little effort is made to differentiate between the beliefs and behaviour of real humans and "aliens", you begin to wonder why the author ever bothered to set his tale on another world in the first place. The cynical might suggest that the "seeded universe" theory therefore makes the bricks-and-mortar part of the writer's task of creation somewhat easier. In this case, that allegation does carry some weight, but is not by any means the whole story.

In "You Can Get There From Here" in Vector 101, Arnold Akien discussed this book as being a good example of the way in which much SF resembles cowboys and indians transposed into outer space, and he had a point. However, the book he read was entitled Optiman, which my copy demonstrably isn't (and it's plugged as a "Pan Original"). The real point, though, is that the publishers have made free and easy with one of the most important bits of a book, for calling a book about war War Games seems to me to impart a somewhat ironical flavour, especially when the prologue includes a couple of interesting moral posers. Any book about war should open up some avenues of moral enquiry for the reader, whether or not it specifically sets out to do so, and in this book several questions are raised. Can it under any circumstances be considered right to manipulate genes in order to produce "optimen" (superhuman fighting machines)? Does war debase the participants, exposure to savagery turning them into savages? When the war is so prevalent as to exclude preoccupation with anything else, what is the effect upon society? These questions are, however, raised only to be ducked:

> '"Many humans feel that we should never have been created," said Andros (the optiman), "no matter how much we can contribute to the war. Do you?"
> '"I don't know," said Garstone. "How do you feel?"
> '"Your kind will learn to accept us. You will get used to us."'

In some ways, the book is true to life in that many issues offer no simple answer, and one also hesitates to accuse the author of not doing something which he didn't set out to do, but Stableford has after all seen fit to offer up these issues, even to the extent of prefacing the work with a quotation from Nietzsche ("Whoever fights monsters should see to it that in the process he does not become a monster"). As it turns out, there is no room in the book for such matters to be resolved because it soon becomes swamped by the onward rush of an unlikely plot concerning the proposed domination of the galaxy by the optimen - hence that alternate title. And it becomes clear that the present title is but a straightforward reference to another facet of the plot, which is the possibility that the "seeders" have filled the universe with humanoids in order to wage an interstellar game of chess, only to sweep the pieces off the board when they get tired of us; not the most novel of conceptions.

If the plot would seem to preclude anything more profound, then so too do the characters, the chief amongst whom, Remy, is another cynical wanderer in the mould of space-pilot Grainger. I mentioned above that the seeding theory leads indirectly to the humans and the aliens being little differentiated, but it does have the point of making the optimen, whom the author considers to be the real aliens, seem indeed inhuman; however, this ploy would have been better realised had the behaviour of Remy and the optimen not been so identical (in spite of their frequently professing their differences).

The best touch of character is towards the end, where Remy, having previously

been most scornful of it, swallows the seeding theory hook, line and sinker, while the archaeologist Delizia, who has spent his whole life hunting down evidence for the theory and has wasted fruitless hours trying to convert Remy, now says: '"That the war is programmed... I don't believe that. I believe we were intended to be something very different..."' This vague evocation of some distant and challenging future for mankind is an ending that has been seen before, and apart from allowing the author to plaster over the still-remaining cracks in his structure and wind the book up, it is presumably meant to leave the reader with a nice warm feeling; but it can also leave him still feeling hungry.

Barry N Malzberg & Martin H Greenberg (eds) - THE SCIENCE FICTION OF MARK CLIFTON (Southern Illinois University Press, 296pp, $15.00)

Reviewed by Mary Gentle

Did Mark Clifton, as the compilers of this book claim, change the face of science fiction? Who can now judge? Perhaps he did in the USA, where the split between the pulps and the main body of literature was wider; but the division wasn't as great in Britain, which has a long tradition of the fantastic in fiction (most of SF's plots and devices can be found in Gulliver's Travels), so from this side of the Atlantic and from a present-day perspective it's difficult to tell. The question isn't relevant, though, if you're considering whether or not to read the book, since an author can be influential without being a good writer, and his works then become no more than historical curiosities. So is Mark Clifton just another preliterate grub embedded in the amber of SF's history?

Yes and no. Yes, because the majority of these stories look very dated. The style of writing, the tricks of phrase, the humour, the general lack of characterisation of women: all have the flavour of the 1950s. And no, because Clifton's central vision of humanity, bleak as it is, is still valid.

He was for twenty years a psychologist, an industrial personnel specialist, and during this time conducted, he estimated, over 200,000 interviews. He therefore had the opportunity for an intense study of a fairly limited range of human beings. In a letter to Judith Merril, quoted in her "Memoir and Appreciation", he stated that he had never found the 'low mass level of intelligence' of the average person, all being receptive and open-minded. But his fiction contradicts this. At one point, he says that the human character comes in about 14 variations, and most of those he depicts as undesirable. One of his main themes - in which he appears to have a strong personal belief - is that of the "emergees", the ESP-talented people who are humanity's next stage of evolution. ESP was at the time considered lunatic fringe material; had he lived, he would have seen it taken over by the sensationalist media, and for all the exposure still come up with a verdict of "not proven". Instead of emerging generation of homo superior, there is only plausible evidence for a weak and unreliable talent.

It may be that, as a writer, Clifton identified himself with these ESPers, since his early work was produced during the McCarthyite period of American history, when to differ from the norm in any way was to be automatically suspect and subversive. Clifton pokes vicious fun at that establishment, and at the type of mind that fostered it - "Clerical Error", for example, is a chilling story of a psychologist who follows a psychotic into the asylum, knowing that the reason for the man's insanity is that this non-too-bright young scientist has been broken by the Catch-22 that science demands a questioning mind and society one that's firmly closed. The story's reactions are sometimes too intense and too self-justifying, though, as if he were beginning to be convinced by the paranoia of the times.

But a reviewer should declare her prejudices: I will therefore say that I have

been carrying around images from two of Clifton's stories since I came across them in a Merril anthology a decade ago - not remembering the plot, or the author's name, or the titles, just the central, powerful images. In "Hang Head, Vandal!", it is the guilt-effigy of a spacesuit hanging on a tower on the desolate, exploited Mars; and in the more powerful "What Now, Little Man?", it is the Earthmen willfully blinding themselves to the intelligence of the aliens they domesticate for use as beasts of burden and as meat. "What Now, Little Man?" might well stand as the yardstick of Clifton's work: here is the Company and its manipulative psychologist trouble-shooter (less convincing than usual, perhaps because Clifton made it a female part); here the first-person narrator who, no matter what professional or family entanglements he acquires, is forever solitary; and here the mass of humanity, lured to a new world by corrupt promises, too stupid to realise the price they'll pay, and callously exploiting the world's native life-forms.

Most people, Clifton intimates, are corrupt. They are willing to delude themselves totally if it means they can gain satisfaction for their appetites and ambitions - and woe betide anyone who rocks the boat or points out the emperor's lack of clothes. Clever men fail in their objectives, going down under the pressures of the system; stupid men can't see beyond their own narrow horizons and swallow whatever stories authority hands down to them, perpetuating the system. It's a bleak, black vision. The only people to come out of it well are (obviously) the psychologists - in the main weak, but well-intentioned - and the ESPers.

These ESPers, from the dimension-twisting in "Star Bright" to the gestalt in "How Allied", turn their backs on the human race. In "Crazy Joey" and the four interlinked stories titled for the Pope couplet - "Remembrance and reflection, how allied;/What thing partitions sense from thought divide" - the ESPers are hunted down by ordinary men, hiding their talents and associating only with their own kind. The "emergee" children no sooner come into the light of day than vanish into other dimensions and the backwaters of society, eventually leaving humanity behind as they travel to the stars to form their own society. "Normal" people are fit for nothing but to be abandoned to their irrational lives. The clue as to why this should be lies in "What Have I Done?", where the narrator indoctrinates a group of alien invaders with all the ideals and virtues mankind is supposed to have, and then stands back waiting for them to be torn to pieces by the "ordinary" people, who have the habit of flaying, crucifying and burning their ideals.

A critic should review the book the author has written, rather than the one she wishes he had written, but here it's worth speculating. If Clifton had a talent equal to his vision, we would have had a modern Swift. If he'd written directly about his work in psychology, we would have had a bitterly accurate account of the 1950s. As it is, we have a handful of stories and novels lamed by the restrictions of the pulp genre, a flat style, and the warped viewpoint imposed (even on a psychologist) by a male-dominated society.

Judith Merril says that he never lived to see the free university movement, the Moon landings, the anti-war and pro-conservation movements, and the mergence of the young people he was waiting for. Perhaps it's just as well, because he also didn't see the movements run out of enthusiasm, the "emergees" selling out to the establishement, and the weary apathy that succeeded the youth revolution. In this authoritarian decade that begins to uncannily mirror the 1950s - repression, cold war and all - any emergees (ESPer or otherwise) would find concealment their only refuge. Somehow, I don't think Mark Clifton would be surprised.

"Don't threaten me with that thing," said the dreadful bacteriologist, "I can fire mine as quickly as you can fire that!"

J G Ballard - THE CRYSTAL WORLD (Avon, 157 pp, $2.25)

Reviewed by Ann Collier

Whoever said that you cannot judge a book by looking at its cover clearly had a precognition of the artwork enfolding this edition. How could the artist have translated the iridescent splendour of the ever-encroaching, crystalline forest into this flat, static, vegetation-less landscape, whose few inhabitants appear to have been accidentally locked in the deep-freeze? The images in this book are par excellence visual, painterly ones, with meticulously detailed descriptions of objects and an almost mystical quality ascribed to the jewelled world, but what is presented to tempt the bookshop browser to part with his rent-money is a drab, quite unseductive, blue mess. It insults Ballard's haunting vision of areas of the earth and all they contain being transformed into brilliant crystal. Into this trange world, where time and the progress towards death are suspended, stumble a collection of enigmatic characters in pursuit of or fleeing from some personal dilemma. The chief protagonist is Sanders, a doctor from a leper colony, searching in the heart of the affected area for the woman with whom he once had an inconclusive affair. Although this novel is often described as a psychological disaster story, it ends with Sanders triumphantly embracing the process of change, abandoning a facile, finding-true-love, happy ending in favour of a more complex integration into the oneness of the universe.

Re-reading this novel highlights the control and purposefulness of the writing. It is structured around contrasts and notably the ubiquitous division into black and white, which Ballard quite explicitly says has no moral significance but represents rather two aspects of a whole, Yin and Yang. Precisely draughted landscapes are divided by light and shadow. Of the two female protagonists, Suzanne, the former lover, is the woman of night, cold, deceased, dusky. Louise, the new lover, is the woman of daylight, warm, sunny and healthy. Their function is not to represent bad and good but to give expression to different aspects of Sanders' personality and psyche, and to this end there is no attempt at finely drawn characterisation. A few telling physical details are sufficient to distinguish the characters, who are otherwise defined by their compulsions. They are registers of the process of crystallisation which is the raison d'etre of the book. The denouement pays scant attention to the resolution of their relationships, which interest Ballard far less than the relationship of the character to the jewelled world and to his own emotional and psychological condition which that world comes to represent. Characters live in an isolated state, either physically in splendidly baroque palaces in jungle clearings or emotionally when love is incapable of satisfying need. The forest, which is the centre of the process, resolves contradictions, suspends time and nullifies previous loyalties and ties. It is an enchanted world in comparison with which the normal, outside world is flat, lifeless and unreal. It offers the integration of all aspects of being and the promise of eternity, conveyed by extraordinarily vivid, surreal images. A briefly seen female character, dying of TB and anaemia, lies amidst ornate furniture, in a Pre-Raphaelite pose, her fragile beauty fading as the forest closes in all around, offering not the horror of the enclosing ice of Anna Kavan but the preservation and enhancement of beauty. Sander's attempts to save a character from crystallisation become a nightmare, for the crystals do not encase the skin but form a part of it, and misguided removal of them produces a mutilated, pathetic monster who begs to be allowed to return to the forest. A band of lepers eerily dance in ecstasy through the forest, perpetuating the association previously suggested between the process of vitrification and cancer or leprosy. Images are densely packed, a limited number of motifs are returned to again and again, reinforcing the impression of a contracting world.

The influence of surrealism is readily apparent as is that of Graham Greene in

the colonial setting and the two sordid, sleazy characters, one of them a guilt-ridden priest who eventually finds salvation. There are echoes of Greene too in some of the many action sequences and their context of a pervasive sense of unease and conspiracy.

I declare my bias. This was one of the books which first attracted me to Science Fiction. Years later, I have forgotten none of its brilliance but was delighted to rediscover it. Indebted to no fashionable idea, not based on a technology which will become dated, its reliance on insistent, lyrical writing and careful structure will ensure its availability to future readers.

Poul Anderson - THE MERMAN'S CHILDREN (Sidgwick & Jackson, 319pp, £7.95)

Reviewed by Mary Gentle

Ever since Tolkien ended the Third Age, we've been overrun with fantasies of the-magic-goes-away variety, and The Merman's Children is another. It's the story of the mer-king Vanimen and his four half-human offspring, and what happens to them when the undersea city of Liri is destroyed by exorcism. There are two narratives: the mer-children's attempt to recover sunken treasure to finance their young sister Yria's life - she having been baptised and so made fully human - and Vanimen's search to rebuild Liri, which ends on the coast of Dalmatia.

The treasure-hunt - previously published as a short story - is the most cohesive part of the book, the Scandinavian background and the hostility humans have for the mers being well depicted. Vanimen's wanderings with his people don't have an equal tension. Then Anderson disposes of all but the oldest mer-children - Yria baptised, Kennin murdered - and send Tauno and Eyjan to Greenland (where the Inuit tribe form an alternative to Christianity far more alien than Anderson's Faerie) before returning them to the Mediterranean. Vanimen and the other mers are baptised and accepted into Christian society. This should be a tragedy, or at least a dubious victory - gaining a soul, but losing immortal Faerie existence - but it makes very little impression on the reader.

Unfortunately for the book, the mer-children, even as halflings, don't come across as beings of Faerie. There isn't the atmosphere Anderson achieved in, say, "The Queen of Air and Darkness" (paradoxically, more SF than fantasy). Anderson isn't at home with anarchy - he sends his free, hedonistic mer-children to search for gold, a notoriously human occupation - nor with sexual freedom: despite their ancestry, Tauno and Eyjan have very Christian taboos against the consummation of incest.

Nominally, the hero, Tauno, is in fact a passive character, following a succession of outside stimuli - lost treasure, lost people, and finally a lost soul: a vilja, a suicide-haunt. Despite a general willingness for mayhem, he shows no initiative. Eyjan is depicted as an independent mer-woman, and for that suffers a completely out-of-character change into a dutiful Christian lady - compare her with Yria who, having docilely obeyed family and church, has all her needs supplied. The one interesting character is a human, Ingeborg, a whore who loves the soulless Tauno, makes her way in the world with intelligence and determination, and finally takes the vilja into herself so that she can become Faerie-halfling and travel where the merman goes.

As for the writing, it's a blend of archaic terminology and sentence structure that, however, factually accurate, gives the impression of being totally spurious. Worst of all, the story drags - the perils aren't real, the hero's in no danger of failure, Vanimen has no chance of success because the plot

ROBERT SILVERBERG LORD VALENTINE'S CASTLE

Silverberg said that he would never write again. Having retired in 1974 in his early forties after completing over 70 novels and 60 non-fiction books, he was reputed to have made a fortune from writing. In 1977, under pressure from Harlan Ellison, he tried to write a short story but couldn't get past the second sentence. But in April 1978, in his fabled garden one sunny afternoon, a brief idea for a book occurred to him. He scribbled the idea on the back of an envelope and got in touch with his American publishers, Harper & Row. After a frenetic publishers' auction, he had committed himself to write a special epic quite unlike anything he had produced before. Harpers gave him a six-figure advance. Forced amidst a great deal of publicity to complete the new book, he found that he couldn't even begin it. Then, on the afternoon of 31 October 1978, whilst once more he was pacing the fuchsia- and cacti-filled garden that had become his overwhelming passion, he found himself writing, almost automatically, on another scrap of paper, the first sentence of a novel, almost like Coleridge waking to the first lines of Kubla Khan.

And then, after walking all day through a golden haze of humid warmth that gathered about him like a fine white fleece, Valentine came to a great ridge of outcropping white stone overlooking the city of Pidruid. It was the provincial capital, sprawling and splendid, the biggest city he had come upon since – since? – the biggest in a long while of wandering, at any rate. There he halted, finding a seat at the edge of the soft, crumbling white ridge digging his booted feet into the flaking ragged stone, and sat there staring down at Pidruid, blinking as though he were newly out of sleep. . . .

Lord Valentine's Castle is now published as a Pan paperback, a vast epic fantasy saga of usurped power and reclaimed fate. It is 'Spectacularly readable . . . it bears comparison with Frank Herbert's *Dune*' *(The Times)*; 'A magnificent Behemoth of a fantasy . . . with all the narrative skills and imaginative brilliance that have made his recent science fiction so exceptional' *(Tribune)*. 'Silverberg's invention is prodigious . . . a near-encyclopaedia of unnatural wonders and weird ecosystems. Silverberg, like a competent juggler, maintains his rhythm and suspense to the end.' *(Times Literary Supplement)*.

Published 9 October 1981

Pan Books

demands his conversion. The basic idea, of Faerie dying out because of the approach of Christianity, is the real 'hero' of the book, and nothing is allowed to stand in its way.

It could have been a big theme; the soulless freedom and hedonism of Faerie opposed to the miserable life but immortal soul of the Christian. Mermen, undersea cities, Averorn, krakens, the tupilak, spirits of the forest, the paradox of a religion that preaches mercy and practices an inquisition -- The Merman's Children could have been a thought-provoking and interesting fantasy, but Anderson mever rises to the occasion. His theology is orthodox, no doubts intrude, and the book adds up to considerably less than the sum of its parts.

J G Ballard - HELLO AMERICA (Jonathan Cape, 224pp, £6.50)

Reviewed by Joseph Nicholas

Down in the deeper levels of the SF ghetto, where word that it's no longer 1941 has yet to penetrate, certain writers are still celebrating the "inevitable" triumph of Western technology and the Western way of life as a whole; but out here in the real world of the late twentieth century, beyond its crumbling walls and gimcrack juvenile wish-fulfillment escapist dreams, J G Ballard has been celebrating its coming demise. The poet of entropic despair, he was the first of the new generation of British authors that came to prominence in the late fifties to turn back from the stars in favour of something he called "inner space", which can in certain respects be taken as a development of the personal introspection traditionally ascribed the "mainstream" novel of character, but what a development: his alienated protagonists, far from being passive prisoners of their own psyches, actively set out to map the connections between their internal, mental landscapes and the external, real ones of the world about them, encyphered representatives of ourselves journeying through the collapsing fabric of our society on obsessive quests for the enlightenment that only a confrontation with their nemesis can bring, told in an unmistakably Ballardian tone and with an unmistakably Ballardian intensity.

His immediately preceding novel to this was The Unlimited Dream Company, which seemed in many ways to be a reprise of certain elements of his previous works, combining the lush jungle flora and fauna of The Drowned World and The Crystal World with the harsh concrete realism of Crash and High-Rise. Hello America seems at first glance to be yet another reprise of these elements, this time combining the arid deserts of The Drought with the lushness of The Drowned World; but, as with any novel, these are essentially the things that go to make it up, and do not serve to define it. The plot here concerns the "rediscovery" of America in the late twenty-first century by an expeditionary force sent out from the barely-subsisting continent of Europe, the world having failed to solve the energy crisis of the 1980s and seeking in the ruins of the abandoned continent for the sprirutal force that will regenerate it. Purists who object that a whole people would not have so willingly evacuated their country and that the bungled attempts at climate control which have turned the land east of the Rockies into a desert and that west of them into a tropical rain forest would have had a far greater effect on the rest of the world than Ballard acknowledges are simply missing the point: it is not plodding scientific fidelity which matters in Ballard's work but the free-ranging use of the imaginative facility to invent, to transmute the ordinary into the fantastic, the better to reveal - as with all art - the things about it that we would normally take for granted, would not think to question.

The novel opens with the beaching of the expedition's ship off the sand-filled canyons of Manhattan and with the main characters being sketched in flashback. Most of them, as it turns out, are destined to die before the halfway point,

but four survive the subsequent trek across the interior of the continent: the ship's captain, Steiner, a man who believes himself to be the reincarnation of the American pioneer spirit and who seeks the freedom for himself that can only be found in the heart of the deserted continent; Anne Summers, a scientist who has grown tired of her dull European life and wishes to immerse herself in the remnants of the Hollywood-like social decadence that she believes characteristic of vanished American culture; the ship's engineer, McNair, who wishes to revel again in the forgotten glories of the late twentieth century's super-technological achievements; and the stowaway, Wayne, whose reasons for making the journey have less to do with the outward realisation of his own private mythology than with a desire to find the man whom he believes might be his father and who disappeared on a previous expedition to America some twenty years before. It is through Wayne's eyes that we view the events of the story: the trek, along cracked highways and through eroded city after eroded city, across the continent; the meetings with the tribes - who bear such names as the Executives, the Bureaucrats, the Gangsters and the Divorcees - of "Indians" who roam its wastes; the journey across the Rockies in the steam cars found in a Brooklyn warehouse, and the entry into the still neon-lit Las Vegas to confront the youthful Howard Hughes figure who has taken up residence there. He, having taken the name of Charles Manson and being as deranged as the original, has established himself there with the aim of rebuilding the imperial might of the United States, and has been systematically destroying, with the aid of the remaining nuclear missiles, the cities of the east in an attempt to keep out the "invaders" from outside that he can see will come to topple him from his throne. Wayne, having found his father, Dr Fleming, now a doddering old man who has renovated the machinery Manson needs to keep his jungle enclave functional, finds himself becoming as infatuated as Manson with the idea of rebuilding American power and, appointed as his Vice-President, sets about attempting to instil some sort of patriotic spirit into the band of Mexican guerillas who constitute Manson's army; but too late, for other expeditionary forces are already on their way, and the book can only end in the destruction of the city and the dreams of renascent power it holds as Wayne and his companions set out for the west coast in the convoy of solar-powered glass pedal-gliders built by Fleming.

Such a plot summary of course does little justice to the book, and certainly not to the extraordinary juxtapositions of images and the bizarre inversions of the "traditional" American societal icons it offers up within its pages. The sand-filled cities, for example: for years it has been impossible for us to look at a city without seeing it in Ballard's terms, as an alienating wasteland of ultimately purposeless concrete blocks, and by subjecting them to so quiet and gradual destruction he demonstrates how alienated they themselves are from the land which gave them birth, monuments to the organisational futility which nature will one day reclaim. Thus Wayne's first view of Washington DC: "Like that traveller of old standing between the ankles of Oxymandias, all he could see were the same dunes and cactus tolling up the once green sward, the same mesquite and burrow-weed. To his left, four hundred yards away, was the Capitol, one of the three most potent images, along with the White House and the Manhattan skyline, that Wayne had brought with him from the Old World. It stood in silence, surrounded by giant cactus, its portico cracked and toppled into the sand. The great dome was holed, a segment collapsed inwards like the shell of a broken egg. At the other end of the Mall the dunes rolled towards the dry basin of the Potomac. In the Lincoln Memorial, Abraham Lincoln sat up to his knees in the sand, staring pensively at the yuccas and gophers." (pages 70-71). It may be the landscape of The Drought, but it is a landscape given new urgency by the energy and resources crises in which our culture is now becoming increasingly mired; and it is counterpointed by the rich revival of the natural world which holds sway west of the Rockies and the incongruities that may be found there: "The giraffe paused among the pools of water in Fremont

Street, raised its delicate muzzle to the rain-washed air and gazed at the glittering facade of the Golden Nugget. As it continued its elegant hobble along the deserted pavement, Wayne rested on the pedals of the Gossamer Albatross, three hundred feet above. The previous night's lightning had cut swathes through the jungle to the north of Las Vegas, driving this gentle creature into the suburbs of the city. It now strolled down the deserted streets, inspecting the casinos like a timid tourist, unaware of Wayne gliding silently on the strong thermals above its head" (page 149). Again, nature steadily and unconcernedly reclaims the works of man, which is of course one of the novel's main themes; a more important one is that evinced by its title, which is to hold America's image of itself and its culture - Wild West theme parks, dead film stars, throw-away consumer goods - up for re-examination in a newer, more intense, more critical light, the better to expose its artificiality, insubstantiality and unfittedness to survive in a changing world. Which might lead one to stigmatise it as an anti-American work, with a definite political stance; but that would be false, for the only ideological message that Hello America can be considered to push is the one common to all Ballard's other fiction: that only at the centre of such seeming desolation, cut adrift from all normal social constraints, can one find the freedom to indulge one's dreams, to work for their most complete possible realisation. Thus is that famous line about the "huddled masses yearning to be free" given new meaning; and while it might be wish-fulfillment power-fantasy, it is light-years removed from the usual run of such which still infests the lower reaches of the genre.

And yet, much though I admire Hello America, I also find it in some respects mildly disappointing. I earlier stated that it seemed something of a reprise of certain elements from The Drought and The Drowned World and, while I allow that these landscapes are integral to the novel's themes (if not to Ballard himself), it must be said that he imparts little newness or originality to them, describing them with no new twists or insights, and I don't think it's just that my familiarity with Ballard's work has robbed them of their earlier impact; it's almost as though he himself knows that he is to some extent reprising his earlier work, reassembling set building blocks into a new configuration, and thus relying on their familiarity to the reader to do his work for him. Then, too, the characters seem to have little new about them: they are the same "encyphered representatives of ourselves" that we have met before in Ballard's previous fiction, set moving on their courses towards their private destinies with the same almost incomprehensible motives and doing all the things that we would expect them to; they are not so much characters (albeit that Ballard's characters have never been more than blank templates onto which we may project our fears and desires) as parodies of themselves, which thus makes it difficult for us to ever fully identify with them. In addition, the novel's style seems parodic, as though Ballard were mocking his own conventions - "Sitting in the dim light against the bar, Anne Summers raised a warning hand. Through the heat sores and streaked make-up Wayne could see the last flicker of concern before she sank back into herself, too dehydrated to move. Above them, Orlowski lay on the green baize of the roulette table, hands outstretched across the circle of numbers, as if hoping to clutch some winning play. Were they all part of a theme park tableau, the last reel of a western?" (page 94) - and although Ballard's style does lay itself open to parody (most notably James Cawthorn's piece in an issue of Moorcock's New Worlds and John Sladek's less concise "story" in The Steam-Driven Boy) for he himself to indulge in such seriously undermines the power of the images he describes.

But it is, nevertheless, its images which carry this book, and what I take away from it regardless of the foregoing cavils: images of dessicated, broken cities, of cactus growing through the wings of parked aircraft, of abandoned cars serving as bowers for displays of tropical flowers, of remotely-controlled helicopter gunships patrolling the skies above Las Vegas, of the convoy of solar-powered glass pedal gliders soaring through the sunlight towards the west coast. It is a marvellous visual experience, and would make an equally marvellous film.

Ian Watson - THE VERY SLOW TIME MACHINE (Granada, 222pp, £1.25)

Reviewed by Chris Bailey

As far as I know, this volume contains all or virtually all of Ian Watson's short fiction written between 1973 and 1978; he is not a bread-and-butter scribbler of short stories and this collection therefore deserves close attention. Two features of Watson's writing which are made evident in The Very Slow Time Machine are particularly noteworthy: firstly, his conceptual gymnastics, the manner in which he violently yokes together various elements from all branches of science, religion and anthopology and produces remarkable fusions of ideas (which here he packs into short story lengths but which lesser writers might feel merited a novel); and secondly, his continual obsession with the nature of reality and our perception of it.

Nearly every story in the book bears out the above assertions. The final piece, for example - entitled 'The Event Horizon', it originally appeared in a 1976 anothology, Faster Than Light: An Original Anthology About Interstellar Travel, and concerns an expedition to a black hole, but Watson is not content merely to give us a spell of juggling with the laws of Schwarzschildian physics. He conceives of a being actually existing inside a singularity and devises a method of communicating with it - "Instantaneous psi-force alone could enter a Black Hole and emerge again". The telemediums of Earth's starships are deliberately maintained in a state of sexual depression until the time of trance, when a combination of sex and a psionic trigger drug is unleashed upon their nervous system "in a copulation that was both physical and transmental". Two telemediums, Mara and Habib, join in this union in order to commune with the "Lover" inside the hole, who tells Mara of the true nature of reality:"That is only a para-universe - a secondary cosmos you inhabit. You have crossed over into the no-place where Reality is". This revealing phrase not only indicates Watson's desire to show us that reality is perhaps not as we assume it is, but also demonstrates his love of paradox which is manifest throughout the whole of the book. The story ends in uncertainty; is the "Lover" a genuine alien trapped inside the singularity or is it a simulacrum of Habib, born in Mara's mind of the two telemediums' fascination with each others' differences? The sheer weight of theorising - of conventional physics and of Watson's adaptation of Trantric sexual philosophies - do not help 'The Event Horizon' to flow easily, but, as is the case with many of these stories, it succeeds because the author sees more than one side to any question and will not give an easy answer.

The title story is probably the best piece in the book. Most time-travel stories tend to work on an incidental basis, with the time-travellers making momentary appearances at various temporal points, but the twist here is that the story is spread over thirty years and during this period linear time itself advances. The Very Slow Time Machine has to go backwards at normal speed in order to advance twice as far forwards instantaneously; an intriguing idea and not without its humorous possibilities, which are not neglected, but, as is usual with Watson, it is the additional layers of meaning and implication which provide the richness. On his "arrival", the traveller is old, ragged and, we are told, insane; as he grows younger and apparently more composed, he begins issuing pronouncements in which he claims to be a messiah who is reversing slowly towards 1985 in order to be catapulted forwards to his Coming in 2055. But how seriously can the putative messiah's messages be taken? And as he grows younger and seemingly more glorious, the world is seized by religious mania, while scientists desperately push forward the frontiers of research in order to fulfil the conditions of his "departure". Who is "sane" and who is "insane"? Once again, our assumptions regarding normality are rendered haywire and one begins putting every word into questioning speech-marks, so well does the story work on a number of different levels.

Several shorter pieces are set in a Japan of the near future, and besides Watson's

obvious fascination with oriental customs and modes of thought ("Zen is a bird's-nest of paradoxes"), one wonders why this should be so. Well, the technological and sociological developments that can be seen in present-day Japan open up one avenue of possibilities, and Watson's cities are crowded and frantic places in which technology often administers to exotic human foibles. The setting also enables the author to achieve an effect of distant impersonality; whether this is due to real or perceived oriental inscrutability I do not know, but it suits a style which is often deliberately clinical and precise. Perhaps the real answer lies in an image from Japanese art, the standing Hokusai wave (directly invoked as a potent metaphor in 'The Event Horizon'). We see characters frozen on the brink of disaster in concise cameos which then tumble inevitably towards climaxes which are often brutal; the description of hara-kiri being administered by a robot gardener to the protagonist of 'Agoraphobia, AD 2000' is especially memorable.

Watson's characters are said by some to lack genuine warmth and roundness, and while the short story format may by its very nature render characterisation perfunctory, it seems to me that he is not so much interested in character as in the biological motor responses of basic human behaviour. 'Thy Blood Like Milk' explores the narrow line between sanity and insanity, the scene being set on an Earth born of another of Watson's unlikely fusions - this time the myth of an Aztec sun-god is re-enacted in a future when the world is shrouded in pollutants. The story opens with the main character, Considine, in the penal ward of a hospital and ends in an extreme manner with him committing human sacrifice as an offering to the sun-god Tezcatlipoca. There is no subtlty of character, but the story stands up well as a merciless analysis of the power of suggestion on the mind and of the excesses to which people may be driven when put under intolerable pressures. It seems that when they are not helpless and bewildered in the face of undreamt-of realities, Watson's people are trapped in the toils of their own obsessions and desires.

These stories are nearly always well-written and, what's more, they are interestingly written, for Watson is not shy of varying and experimenting with his style. Every piece in the book has its own individual flavour. The title story is presented in the form of a series of humorously quizzical bulletins which imperceptibly develop a tone of quiet religious fanaticism. 'My Soul Swims In A Goldfish Bowl' is a deceptively light-hearted squib of a story which follows its title literally ("I prod it. It ducks, bobs up again. . .."). 'Agoraphobia, AD 2000' is founded on a pun; the man who ventures into the open is termed an astronaut and he is under the control of the Space Agency. 'Thy Blood Like Milk' is perhaps the only story which betrays stylistic excess; the coarse speech of the "sunrunners" ("'You know that's illegal, you bitch', I snarled") does not always sit easily next to the rhapsodic incantations addressed to Tezcatlipoca, although given the difficulty of the requirement that Considine should gradually be transformed from a villain into an assumed sun-god, the story is well-handled. Throughout the book, the paradoxes and conceptual leaps upon which so many of the stories are founded are woven into the very text, and the reader constantly encounters phrases that arrest his attention: "They. . . vanish into oblivion - which is to say: into reality"; "Cancer's the perfect replicator"; "Remember Sodom and Gomorrah! Those had reached a crucial point, attained a critical mass of sinfulness. . .". The abiding stylistic memory of the book, though, is the frequent peppering of the cool narrative by red splashes of violence; Watson can use language very brutally when he wishes.

If these stories have a fault, it is that sometimes they show the strain of trying to pack too much into a finite space but, always demanding and often difficult, they comprise a book which should be read more than once, and with increasing reward each time; it is good to come across an SF story collection of which that can be said.

NOT JUST ENTERTAINMENT

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I think in 'The Shape of Things to Come' (*Vector* 101) (Joseph Nicholas) said many things that needed saying, and I hope the sheepish and reactionary replies of some of your readers (interesting that they appear to be personally offended by his remarks, as if escapist fiction is a crutch to them which he is threatening to kick away) don't put him off saying it again. Of course this is the tremendous problem of the science fiction readership, that it is now a highly intelligent, well-read and sophisticated audience which is familiar with the images of science fiction, and could therefore serve as the foundation for a much more sophisticated literature than science fiction is now, hampered and weighted down by its own history and the generation that requires escape and abhors challenge. I once read a review in the *New Musical Express* of the Gang of Four's album 'Entertainment', and also an interview with the group. The issue that the G of F were getting at in their album, and in calling it 'Entertainment', was that there is no such thing as 'just' entertainment. Everything that purports to entertain also suggests or confirms ideas, and is at least in part a persuasion by the author of the existence of a world which he has created out of his own mind, and which cannot therefore be devoid of bias of some sort. Approval must be given to certain characters against others; especially in an adventure book, there must be some concept -- and it must be the author's -- of right and wrong. What more harmless a writer could there be than Enid Blyton, whose golliwog caused one of the biggest stinks in modern literature? As long as this is true, there must be at the very least some discussion of the philosophical implications of 'entertainments', and a reviewer must expose the philosophical implications of a book, even if the author himself along with his audience conspires (through ignorance) to hide them. Ideally, authors would admit that their books cannot be 'just entertainment' to the degree that they can no longer fool the reading public into believing that they can, even if they cannot elevate their books out of this trough to the level where they actually challenge the reader to agree or disagree with their statements. And of course the readers themselves must become aware that there is no such thing as the bland, harmless neutrality they crave for, and that they must think about the implications of everything they read. This is part of the job of the critic. Perhaps if publications like *Vector* and *Paperback Inferno* continue to challenge this whole false idea of an escapist literature we will no longer have readers and writers who actually strive to create a literary institution of non-discussion, of non-critical acceptance by the reader of the writer, of the covering of philosophical tracks with a pretence of harmlessness, and of wilful persistence in ignorance. Then perhaps the full potential of the science fiction readership to encourage an intelligent literature by being intelligent about it will be realised.

ONLY HERE FOR THE MONEY

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There is an increasingly popular trend to assume that anybody who writes SF does so purely in the expectation of making money from it. For instance, Ben Bova recently published a guide book, *Notes to a Science Fiction Writer*, which claimed to contain "the secrets of writing science fiction that sells". His advice on how to submit manuscripts for publication and how to improve your style is both sound and useful, but it is dangerous to advocate writing fiction purely in order to sell it. If commercial success were the only motive for writing SF, the genre would be in a pretty sorry state. Bova's view that the purpose of writing SF is to win awards and make money is exceedingly narrow-minded.

I look with contempt upon any writer who will not write a story that he knows deserves to be written simply because nobody will be willing to buy it. No wonder that a great deal of the best fiction is written by part-time writers, whose full-time jobs give them financial security to write what they want to. Gene Wolfe, whose "The Book of the New Sun" was so highly praised in recent *Vectors*, is an editor on the staff of an engineering magazine. The high degree of continuity between the four volumes of Wolfe's series was only possible because he had time to do a second draft on all the books before publishing any of them. In a recent interview in *Amazing* (September 1981) he said: "This kind of thing is the great advantage of writing on the side as opposed to writing for a living." The freedom which Wolfe's job gives him allows him to write exactly what he wants to. Although some of Wolfe's work has never been published, that which is available is among the best in the SF field.

Much of the fiction published in Harlan Ellison's *Dangerous Visions* anthologies would not otherwise have appeared in print, but that did not deter the writers of these stories from writing them.

Obviously, all professional writers have to sell in order to eat unless they have some other source of regular income. If they do not have this financial security, they are forced to write to a market, in which case their fiction is not written in freedom. The only full-time writer who is free to write what he wants is the famous full-time writer. For example, Norman Mailer -- who has written some of the worst dross ever unleashed upon a gullible public -- knows that it will all be published because he is a 'big name, best-selling author'.

I may be being grossly idealistic, but I think it is quite justifiable to say that a writer will have far more freedom to write meaningful and original fiction if he is independent of the commercial publishing machine. Obviously, if his stories are published it is a welcome bonus, but commercial acceptability should not be a prerequisite for the writing of science fiction.

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** Ursula Le Guin once said to me (he says, dropping names unashamedly): "Never write for a living." To choose an example close to home (perhaps too close, but I hope he won't take it badly), I wish Robert Holdstock would employ his not inconsiderable talents in writing novels, and not churning out tours of the galaxy or alien landscapes. Come on, Rob; *Necromancer* came out in 1978, for goodness' sake!

THE REAL THING

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Jim England's Standpoint article seemed a bit incoherent; I had to re-read the last couple of paragraphs to extract the main thrust of the argument -- not a good advertisement for any of his published work. He seems to think that SF should be more realistic but not more than can

be taken comfortably. It's all right to portray hopeful utopias, but the more 'realistic' (i.e. likely to occur) dystopias are too depressing, is what Jim appears to be saying. What's the point in asking for SF to be more realistic and then to confine its scope so that it simply becomes more 'realistic' escapism. Let's face it, reality is hell! I know that Jim justifies his argument by saying that portraying feasible utopias will lead to a better future. I take the opposite view that these cosy descriptions of what is to come will only indoctrinate people into an attitude of 'don't worry about today because tomorrow will be O.K.' SF writers have a duty to portray feasible (or slightly exaggerated) future dystopias to act as a warning for the future, that if something isn't done soon "the shit will hit the fan". Many writers have been very effective in this, most prominently John Brunner (*Stand on Zanzibar The Sheep Look Up, etc.*) and J G Ballard through the use of disaster metaphors. In this way perhaps man will become more aware of his own innate destructive tendencies, although I'm personally very doubtful about the didactic capability of SF.

Until the appearance of Andy Sawyer's article I had seen no mention of Doris Lessing's 'Canopus' novels in the reviews section of *Vector*. This seems to me to point out a real weakness in your editorship. You've spent several editorials in spelling out your critical standpoint which has as one of its foundations the belief that SF should be judged in the context of Literature as a whole, and yet you seem to have ignored a large chunk of Literature. This is the work of authors (whom I shall call 'fabulists') who, although not genre SF writers, do use SF tropes to great effect in stories that to all intents and purposes would otherwise be labelled 'fiction' (and are by publishers). Here is where Doris Lessing comes in, because although she does use SF tropes, she does so in a naive way. This is not to detract from the very obvious power that *Shikasta* (the only 'SF' novel of hers that I've yet read) possesses, but she only uses the SF background to make her metaphor more concrete (as Andy points out in his article), and some of the SF trappings appear to be used a bit awkwardly, they don't come naturally to her. This is only to be expected since Ms Lessing has only dived into the SF maelstrom after a successful career in the mainstream.

The advantage fabulists have is that their work has developed in the mainstream, always having some SF elements as an integral part of the work. I am talking about writers such as Angela Carter, Emma Tennant (my personal favourite), Thomas Pynchon -- and even Robert Nye uses mythical characters as the basis for his bawdy (and hilarious) fantasies.

Under David Wingrove's editorship this type of fiction (which I think he entitled metafiction) received some attention, at least enough to stimulate my interest. But you seem to have a blind spot for this type of fiction.

I think that rather than SF enriching the mainstream, it is only through authors who have grown up under influences from both sides of the fence that fiction can develop to a higher form. SF on its own is lacking the necessary literary skills (apart from a few, too few, exceptions), and the mainstream, when it borrows from SF, lacks the necessary elan or sense of wonder.

** Blind spot, eh? Andy's article is the only one of its type that I've received, and I published it: that's a 100% record. (You'd think to listen to Paul I'd been doing nothing for a year but rip up manuscripts about Emma Tennant! Tell you what, Paul: you write me an article about her work.) As for the lack of reviews of such books, complain to the publishers. They (or at least the hardback publishers) don't seem to want to send us their books for review. After all, we're only a grotty little sci-fi mag, and not interested in anything except space-ships and ray guns, are we? Talk about brick walls! (Even the hard-line SF ghetto fans only erect fences...)

Mary Gentle
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Vector mafia here...! I would like briefly to disabuse Jon Wallace of the idea that I'm pessimistic. Since writing the Standpoint to which he refers, I've come across (entirely randomly, no detective work on my part) a very average 15 year old boy who can neither spell, punctuate, nor make particular sense in his essays -- for which he isn't penalised, being in the school's 'lowest group' -- and a woman who in her letters writes 'can't of' for 'can't have', and on a page containing nine sentences uses three full stops, one of them in the wrong place. This woman is a fully-qualified teacher of eight year olds.

Jim England's 'SF and Reality' seems to me to be trying to justify literature -- and he isn't alone, it's surprising how many people feel this urge. Why does it need justification? There's the old chestnut of 'escapism' -- but use of the imagination makes us aware of other levels than just work-eat-sleep. That isn't escape, it's exploration. To counter escapism, there's realism: and I agree with Mr England that no novel is ever realistic. No artistic medium is. Life is formless, and the function of a story teller is to make a pattern -- what kind of pattern depends on the individual reader. The answer to the question 'what sorts of things should we write?' will come with a million subjective variations. As Kipling said, "there are six and ninety ways / of constructing tribal lays / and every single one of them is right."

Jim England would like to see SF writers planning 'realisable utopias'. Well, why not? Find one worth building, and I'll be there with pick and shovel. But that isn't a justification of why people read or write. Saying literature has to be useful and practical is only the Puritan work ethic again. Readers read and writers write primarily because they get pleasure from it -- that's what books are for. Before someone springs the 'mindless entertainment' syndrome on me, I'd better add that there's more pleasure to be had from the literate works than from the shallow ones. The ideal novel would, I suppose, be original, well-characterised, challenging; contain accurate portrayals of real life and fantastic diversions from it; use language in an original but clear style; make the reader laugh, think, wonder, and cry; and run to about a thousand pages, with no commercially inspired sequels. I must admit I haven't run across it in W H Smith lately... However, the closer this ideal is approached, the more pleasure (since to learn is also a pleasure) and the more reason for writing or reading it. The real objection to the shallow and second-rate is that they cheat their audience.

:: I'm not really trying to engender a feud, but here's...

Jon Wallace
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I think Mary Gentle is treading on marshy ground with her statements regarding follow-ups and serials. Who can say whether or not Eddison's or Donaldson's work 'grows organically from the author's previous works' or whether they are written to cash in on the success of previous efforts? I don't think we should let good writing blind us to the more commercial aspects of this trend, whoever is part of it.

Martyn Taylor is (as Mary Gentle was in *Vector* 102) being too pessimistic about the eventual fate of the written word. However, he has touched upon a subject which could do with a proper examination, that of multi-media treatments of themes and works. As Martyn points out, any form of information transmission has its faults; the written word may not communicate as much as the spoken word in terms of nuance, etc, especially to someone who finds it difficult to visualise as they read. The spoken word can get over much more in the way of emotional content than the written word, and it can do so more economically. A visual medium can put across purely visual phenomena far better than can either written or spoken word, but cannot carry as much sheer

relevant detail as written work (although it is far better for carrying background detail, which adds to the texture of the finished piece), but it tends to allow the imagination to stagnate, unlike the spoken word.

All these media have their own points in favour, and the points against can be cancelled out by one of the other two. For example, the current radio adaptation of *The Lord of the Rings* is at best adequate when considered alone, but taken in conjunction with the books, both acquire a new dimension.

The main problem lies in the recognition of this by the promoters and producers. If, say, the radio version was designed -- and promoted -- as something to be listened to as the books were read, then the true whole might be appreciated. The same is, of course, true of the visual media: films, TV, comics. *Star Wars* was added to by the novelisation, and might have been even more so if the novel/film had been designed as a coherent whole from the start.

The solution lies in the conception. Non-fiction has been marketed as a whole for years -- see *Life on Earth*. So why not fiction, eh?

Who is Adrian Last, to presume to say whether or not I read too much SF? I stand by my original statement!

SF ART

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I had originally intended writing a letter giving my definition of SF art as 'artwork containing SF ideas or objects as a main subject'. However, the more I thought about the subject, the more I began to wonder.

For years I had considered myself an amateur SF artist without giving much thought to definitions. In fact, for the most part, my efforts were decidedly SF in nature (i.e. spaceships, etc.). But, as I attempted to put more meaning into what I painted, the less it looked like SF art as I had always accepted it. Even if the central theme was science fictional, the result still didn't look too much like SF art to me.

So I arrived at the following questions:

a) As painting is a visual artform, should it only be called SF art if it looked the part?
b) Should I stick to my earlier definition and let the idea behind a painting be the deciding factor, even if the painting didn't look much like SF art?
c) If I decided on (b), then where should I draw the line between what is or isn't SF in the first place?
d) Can anyone actually define SF?

At this point I had a strange feeling I was getting nowhere fast, and, as my brain was starting to hurt, I gave up and went down the pub instead.

Since that day I have gradually come to the conclusion that it might be better to stop trying to define and classify works of art altogether. Why not just stick to simple descriptions, such as 'novels', 'paintings', 'sculpture', etc, and describe the artwork on its own terms instead of trying to cram it all into a neat box that it doesn't fit anyway?

Mind you, loc writers would have to find something else to write about then, wouldn't they?

Suddenly there was that strange feeling in the air. There was a weird sensation of the presence of a presence; *they were no longer alone!*

GOSH! WOW! COSMIC!

Marcus L Rowland
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With reference to Mary Gentle's letter in *Vector* 103, it does not surprise me in the least to hear that Terry Wogan has become interested (if that is the right word) in *Cosmos*.

My first reaction to this programme was one of extreme boredom, tempered slightly on watching later installments. There are occasional gems amongst the turgid narration, such as the demonstration of the Doppler Effect, Fitzgerald Contraction and the Twin Paradox by a kid riding a lambretta across the Italian countryside. Unfortunately the bulk of the programme still seems to be Mr Sagan's droning voice (second only to Larry Niven's as a substitute for counting sheep) waffling on and on about elementary particles (with alarming oversimplifications), black holes, and numerous other phenomena that have been covered a few hundred times better by *Horizon*.

This programme is obviously designed to appeal to the same audience as *Arthur C Clarke's Mysterious World* and *Project UFO*, and in response to Ms Gentle's last remark, "Is nothing sacred?", my reply is: "No way." I'm told that Mr Sagan is a brilliant lecture speaker when not hiding behind his abstract shots of Martians (?) and intergalactic Unidentified Flying Snowflakes. Could someone please suggest to the Beeb that they get him to make a straight lecture series, or else to repeat his Christmas Royal Institution talks, which I somehow managed to miss twice.

NOT SO INFERIOR

Paul Kincaid
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I think Garry Kilworth (Letters, *Vector* 103) is misinterpreting what I have said. Of course I do not think that writers like Le Guin and Cowper need anyone to apologise on their behalf. Indeed I believe that there are quite a few SF writers whose work displays considerable literary merit. My intention in that statement, and many others of similar import, was not to point out what is bad in SF but to point out what is bad in SF criticism. We are all aware of a vocal body that believes that SF should be judged solely on its merits as SF without reference to its literary merits. I believe this view is harmful to science fiction. If critics were all to examine literary merit as part and parcel of all their examinations of science fiction, then there would be no question of SF being on 'the level of a serious literary form'.

Yes, Mr Kilworth, SF is already there; it's just that some critics, and thus some writers, haven't learned that yet.

'MAINSTREAM'

Alexander Doniphan Wallace
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Cursory reading lends belief that the word 'mainstream' is rarely used other than by persons interested in SF & F. Should this conjecture have validity, curious conclusions might be drawn.

Whatever, Mary Gentle (Standpoint, *Vector* 102) quickly defines 'mainstream' as fiction of 'character and society'. These, character and society, are so large that, even conjoined, almost every good novel that I have read is mainstream according to her criteria. I postulate this: people are the most interesting things there are, and a novel not about people is unlikely to be good. People en masse are society and people individually are character. Is it not transparently clear that people are the quintessential elements of good fiction? It might be that JRRT's hobbitry is a *gegenbeispiel*, or Le Guin's *Left Hand of Darkness*, but there are no cold rolled iron definitions in the arts.

THE NEW SF MAGAZINES

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The Omni Book of the Future, eh? Gawd -- and there was naive old me thinking we were about to get the lowdown on a new UK SF rag that would storm the literary barricades, blow a few minds, and generally make a stink... Well, there's no harm in dreaming, is there?

Don't get me wrong, I'm not knocking David Langford's sincere attempt to help create a good UK SF publication, but surely it is obvious to anyone that the projected *Omni BotF* will simply be a commercial enterprise staying clear of politics, sex, experimentation, satire and perversity.

What we really need is a SF mag. with the production values of *Private Eye* (!), free of US financial support -- in fact, free of 'the business'. A publication that would thrive on being controversial, recognising nothing as sacred. Much more importantly, it must reject the literary establishment. Modern fiction has to exist in a hostile electronic environment -- words have been devalued, their meaning wiped out in this age of mass propaganda.

We want a raw, multi-purpose guerilla literature to fight the bastards at their own game! Humour must be a major element in our arsenal -- however dark and sick it may necessarily have to be. Thanks, but no thanks, D.L., I don't want any more bland futurism sponsored by Madison Ave., the Pentagon and (the defunct) SF mafia...

** Does *Interzone* sound any better? Or are Colin Greenland *et al* too much
** of the 'literary establishment'...?

Nick Shears
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The news from the ubiquitous Dave Langford is joyous indeed. I'm sure there will be a multitude of voices raised against *The Omni Book of the Future*, most especially as a potential fiction market, but surely anything is a blessing when there is so little else available. More power to Messrs Langford and Rohan and all others involved. (Just think how easy it would have been for the 'magazine' to be filled with reprints!)

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Adrian Last's letter set the hackles gnashing their sackcloth and ashes. *Focus* was an interesting and useful journal, well worth paying for let alone receiving free, and he does not have to read it if it offends his ideas on what the BSFA should be publishing. Clearly many other members are quite happy with it. And, if I read the smoke signals aright, it is not quite dead anyway but merely comatose. But I agree with him on fanfiction. It can be excrutiating, and even the best sometimes makes me cringe. Why, I cannot say -- maybe it is the grandiose delusions of literature the stuff suffers from. Not like wot *Time Warriors of Zool* woz.

(Re *Omni BotF*) Any major publishing news is potential good news in Britain. Providing it is not run by Ben Bova or Isaac Asimov.

WE ALSO HEARD FROM

Arnold Akien, who expressed concern about the seeming change in direction of *Vector*.

Iain R Byers, who sent a detailed analysis of letters to *Vector* and *Matrix* over the last year or two, and several pieces of artwork.

John Dell, who sent some more artwork.

Doris Lessing, who enjoyed reading 103 very much. (Yes, the Doris Lessing. Wonder if I dare use her name on the cover...?)