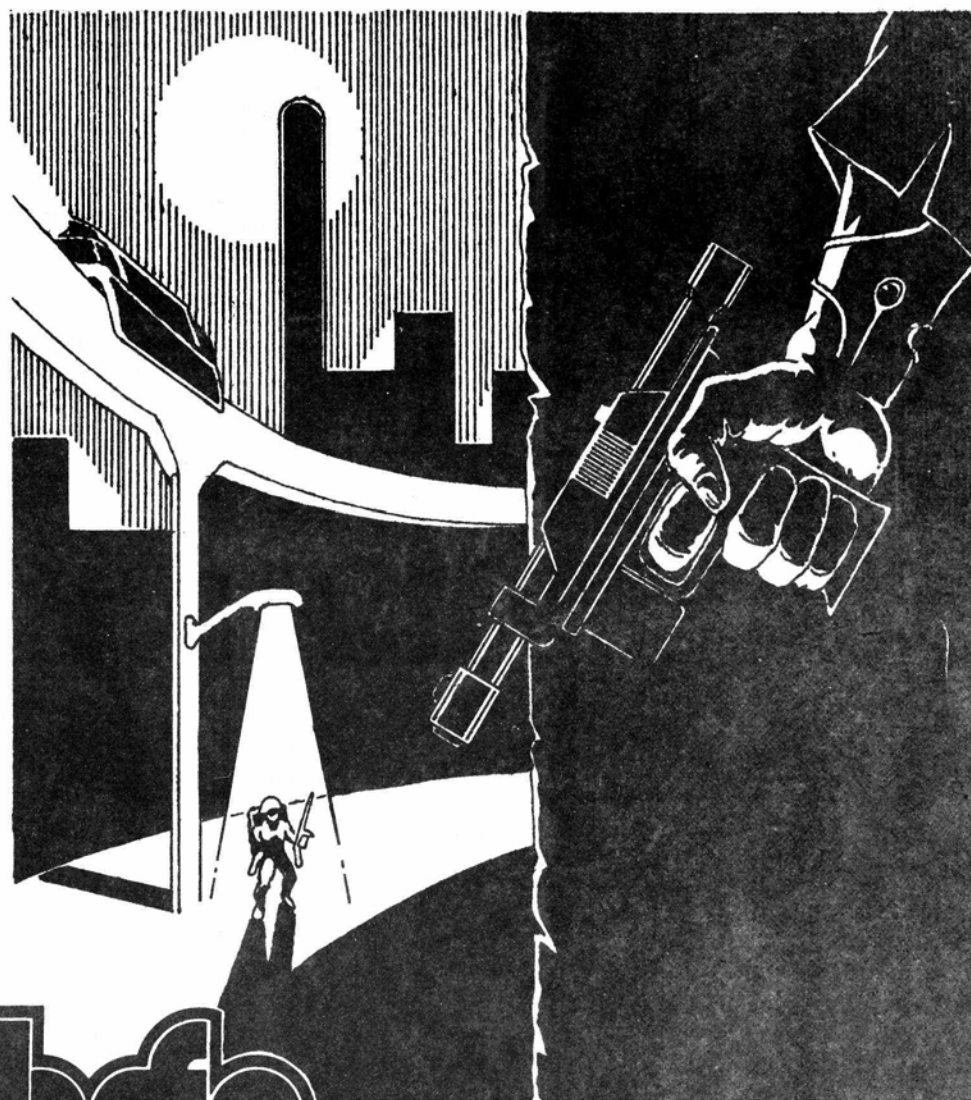


VECTOR

The Critical Journal of the BSFA

75p



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ISSUE 105

DECEMBER 1981

VECTOR

The Critical Journal of the BSFA

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Vector is published bi-monthly by The British Science Fiction Association Ltd

ADVERTISING RATES

| | | |
|----------------------|-----|--|
| Back cover | £40 | Copy should be A4 or division thereof for reduction to A5, black on white, camera ready. Quotes will be given for special processing requirements. |
| Interior - full page | £30 | |
| - half page | £20 | |
| - qtr. page | £10 | |

All advertising correspondence should be addressed to the editor.

PRINTING by the BSFA Printing Service.

Many thanks to John and Eve Harvey, who do all the printing work.

The BSFA Printing Service is available to all BSFA members. Please contact John and Eve for details and quotations.

John & Eve Harvey, 43 Harrow Road, Carshalton, Surrey

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"Well, where is the editor this time?" you are no doubt asking yourselves, or anyone else who happens to be around. "Has he skipped out two issues early? Has the fix gone in on the BSFA Committee to appoint Paul Kincaid editor no matter who else applies?"

No, it's still me in full control; I'm just having an idle issue, letting other people do the work while I only type it all out and paste it up (except for the bits that Eve Harvey types for me -- in the different typeface -- for which I haven't thanked her in print before. Many thanks, Eve. (I have a whole lot for you for the next issue...))

As for Paul's 'Guest Editorial', well Paul doesn't consider it ethical for him to put in his own articles whenever he feels like it, thus abusing his position as Features Editor, so he sent it to me for my approval. So I printed it, with no hesitation. If I had written it myself the sentiments would have been exactly the same. I am sure that publishers would actually do better to 'invest' in a lot of authors to a small extent each (say, enough for those authors to live) than to spend a huge amount on one book, paying one author and a lot of advertising outlets.

Steve Gallagher writes about radio science fiction and his own experiences in it in 'Blind Man's Movies'. And people say Vector doesn't cover SF in the media...

The response to Reassessments has not been very good. Nil, in fact. Once more I've had to grab a review of a reissued novel from Joe's Book Reviews. But in fact Jim England's piece on Kate Wilhelm's novel is more or less exactly what I'm looking for -- a view, preferably vitriolic, that runs counter to the accepted view of a novel or story, or even writer. Mostly this will mean a scathing put-down of a so-called 'classic of science fiction', but it would be interesting to see the converse; something like a favourable review of *The Number of the Beast*, perhaps. Get writing!

'Work in Progress' is a short piece in which Stefan Lewicki outlines the subject matter and approach to a research project in science fiction. This is how real academics do it.

Got some good Standpoints this time. Chris Bailey writes about Doris Lessing's *Shikasta* in a piece which could almost have been a Reassessment, except that *Shikasta* hasn't really been around long enough to be more than 'assessed'. Brian Aldiss also writes mainly about Doris Lessing, but also about other authors from outside of SF who use SF sometimes, in what was sent to me as a letter. John Brunner (my, my, aren't the big names prevalent this time?) is trying to get support from SF authors, editors and publishers for immediate disarmament talks. Of this, Jerry Pournelle would not approve. Jerry Pournelle knows what he can do.

Then there are Book Reviews and Letters, though not many letters. More letters are required! (So is an editor.)

Next issue will contain articles from some of Gregory Benford, Mary Gentle, Josephine Saxton and Ian Watson. And anyone else the Features Editor manages to put the screws on (thumb screws...).

There will be a few book reviews, unless Joe sends through a few more, in which case there will be more than a few. But no Reassessments, Standpoints or letters -- unless you write some. The message is clear.

Kevin Smith

GUEST EDITORIAL

the death of science fiction

I'm going to stick my neck out and say that *The Affirmation* by Christopher Priest is a good book that is worth reading. In fact I would go further than that and say it is the best book in an already distinguished career, more than deserving its place in the last twelve for the Booker Prize, and should be read by anyone with any interest in contemporary fiction and science fiction.

The reason I'm chancing my neck in saying this is that no one in British paperback publishing can be found to agree with the remark. To judge from their reaction, *The Affirmation* is no more worthy of your attention than the first scribbblings of an illiterate infant. One by one, these omniscient arbiters of your tastes and literary interests have decided, unequivocally, that none of you might wish to read a paperback edition of Christopher Priest's new book. It has been rejected by every paperback publisher in this country.

Nor is Priest the only author to suffer so at the hands of those who are supposed to act as go-betweens, bringing their books into our hands. If you are, as I am, a keen fan of Keith Roberts you may be interested to know that he has yet to find even a hardback publisher for his novel *Grania*. And there are a string of other writers now having difficulty finding a publisher -- including at least one well-known writer who tends to be called 'commercial' rather than merely 'good'.

Something is seriously wrong. Particularly when you consider the high quality of the SF that has appeared in the last couple of years -- Benford's *Timescape*, Holdstock's *Where Time Winds Blow*, Roberts's *Molly Zero*, Wolfe's *The Book of the New Sun* among others. Science fiction is getting better, and less accessible.

There are probably more than a few reasons for this. One, however, springs most clearly to mind. Remember, these same arbiters of public taste were the ones who decided that we should each and every one of us shell out our hard-earned cash for such masterpieces as *Number of the Beast*, *The Snow Queen* and *Lord Valentine's Castle*. And to show their faith in our good taste they invested in these books enough money to buy a dozen or more thinner but finer novels. Of course they then had to justify this investment by investing even more money in advertising to make sure we all knew how vital these books were to our continuing existence. The end result of all these blockbusters is that many more books are denied a place on our shelves.

What is happening in publishing is analogous to what is happening in the film industry. Once upon a time the main reasons for making a film included a simple love of films, just as publishing was once done largely for the love of books. That simple regard for, and pride in, what was being produced seems to have vanished forever. The money men have taken over. The result in both industries has become a desire to make bigger profits by heavy investment in the most saleable commodities, while the less saleable go to the wall.

Theoretically this should mean more money to plough back into less obviously bestselling books. It doesn't work like that. In the first place, big profits on one book breed a desire for big profits on all. The search becomes one for more blockbusters rather than a variety of fiction. In the second place, even with these large profits, the amount of investment made in the blockbusters means that there is only a limited amount of cash available.

Then, of course, there is always the problem that if one of these blockbusters should fail, the resultant loss is that much greater. In the film world this has happened with *Heaven's Gate*; in SF neither *Number of the Beast* nor *Lord Valentine's Castle* look as if they are going to pay back the massive investment.

Pan, in particular, seem to have burnt their fingers over *Lord Valentine's Castle*, which means there is no money to invest elsewhere. Recently they have gone out of their way to acquire all Priest's earlier books and have brought them out in an edition that seems to be selling quite well. Nevertheless they cannot afford to add *The Affirmation* to this list. The ludicrous fees paid to Silverberg have assigned Priest's finest work to limbo.

It may be a simplistic view, but I would have thought it better for the publishing business as a whole, and for the rest of us too, if the money available were spread over a variety of less-costly books. That way profits on individual books may be more modest, but losses would be smaller too, and with that many more books it is not going to be an all-or-nothing venture; there is more chance of some of the books making a profit.

Now this scheme may have the disadvantage of bringing more second-rate books onto the market, but then, the current crop of blockbusters that are taking such a disproportionate slice of publishing budgets are not noticeably among the finest works that SF has produced. On the other hand, the good books do seem to be among those being squeezed out at the moment, and some such plan would allow them to reach our bookshops.

To be honest, the publishing scene may not be quite as bad as I suggest. *The Affirmation* could well receive paperback publication at the hands of its hard-back publisher, Faber, one of the publishing houses that does seem to care for what it produces. Other publishers, also, may at last find space for some of the good books that are going begging. And the publishers themselves are constrained by the dictatorial powers of faceless stock-controllers in the warehouses of our only big distributors, W.H. Smith and Bookwise. Nevertheless something must be done if science fiction is not to be strangled by a welter of over-expensive blockbusters and a desire for ever bigger profits that subsumes all other considerations.

Paul Kincaid

BLIND MAN'S MOVIES

Steve Gallagher

Being asked to write a piece on SF and radio has involved something of a mental switcharound for me; from dabbler to guru in one fast leap. But the illusion of expertise isn't one that I could hope to maintain for long, or even with much sincerity. The background in the field that I have is varied, but it's also limited; varied in that I've worked on projects for both the BBC and the ILR networks, shoestring and prestige, and limited in that we're talking about a total of around twelve hours of material -- some of it broadcast in slots where the entire audience would probably fit quite comfortably in a minibus.

So I wouldn't claim to offer great insight on a medium that I've never regarded as my main obsession and that I haven't done any work for since the end of 1979 when *The Babylon Run* was written, nor can I make any penetrating historical analysis of the works of others. All I can really offer are travellers' tales and maybe show you what's left of some of the bruises.

I'll begin by declaring my prejudices; I think that radio drama is a great medium, and I also think that it's a dying medium. Dying because the arrival of television gave it a hard blow that weakened and in some places split it at the seams, leaving the way open first for the pirates and then later their offspring the commercial stations to build something rather different out of the choicest pieces. There are shadows of the old form in there, all right; but they're only shadows, and given time they'll fade.

For me the greatness will stay, though, right up to the end, not because of the medium's current achievements but because of its potential -- a potential that was most fully realised back in the days before the pictures in a box took over from the pictures in your head.

And listen to me -- I wasn't even born then.

I have the same feelings about the golden age of radio as I have for silent movies and Shakespeare. There's a certain kind of mind-set needed to appreciate each, an attitude and comprehension that came naturally both to artists and audiences and which was a combined product of history, social forces and the current level of technology. I think it's probably fair to guess that a reasonable number of the audience in Shakespeare's Globe didn't have an English Lit. 'A' level, and that this didn't interfere with their understanding of the plays to any measurable degree. Academic study is the price that twentieth century man has to pay in order to recreate just some part of the Elizabethan mind-set, to plug himself into an age where language was the primary tool of imaginative communication. And if looking back at the compressed sophistication of the old literature should begin to give us an inferiority complex, let's remember that it's a two-way business; bring Shakespeare or Marlowe or John Donne forward and sit them in a preview theatre to watch a roll of TV commercials, and I'll guarantee total bafflement. Comprehension

of rapid-fire sequential images is a specific of today's mind-set -- a pity that a junk form like the TV commercial should happen to be the leading edge of its development, but there it is.

Apply this to some of the nostalgia radio shows that are starting to make their way around on record and on cassette -- Suspense Theatre, the Shadow, Valentine Dyall as the Man in Black, the original Mercury Theater "War of the Worlds". On a first impression they might seem like Stan Freberg parodies, but this is just a dysfunction of the mind-set. We've got to look through that, make a few compensatory adjustments in ourselves; and if all we can see is quaintness or kitsch then we just took a test and, brother, we failed it.

Maybe we shouldn't be too harsh. The step from Tamburlaine to the Martini commercial is big enough for us to know that there's some travelling been done, but a much smaller move may not even look like a move at all although it alters the perspective in every direction.

Take the use of a narrator. Still an accepted convention in radio, but how changed. Now the narrator is usually one of the characters interjecting with a piece of interior monologue or, more rarely, the author's voice; no longer an Olympian, powerful delivery punching home a good eighty per cent of the story with the authority of God himself. No longer can we accept lightning-brief scenes, incidental music running under the dialogue rising suddenly to underscore a climax, the sudden zoom-in on a specific sound effect. To appreciate the full impact of all this, try to get hold of a copy of episode one of the old 'Lone Ranger' radio show and put it on headphones, loud... but be warned, it moves.

Today's styles in radio drama are much more sedate. Scenes are lengthy and more fully developed, sound effects are naturalistic, and music, when it is used at all, tends to sit between the scenes rather than becoming part of them. It's like a film with the projector lamp blown and everybody pretending that it doesn't matter, we can follow the story anyway; but in the old days, the pictures were already a part of the package.

There's a detectable hankering amongst those who work in radio, and in radio drama specifically, to get back some of the flavour of those old days. somehow to grab the family audience back from the TV and get them gathered around the wireless set in the way they used to be for Dick Barton. It can't happen, at least not in the same way; even if the old techniques were to be re-adopted, the mind-set has changed. Radios have become portable, and radio listening has as a consequence become an activity conducted as a supplement to something else. The listener who sits and consciously focuses his or her attention is getting rarer and rarer.

But the hankering won't go away. It's a kind of frustration, a crackle of static to be felt near a terminal that no longer has the outlet to discharge its power. And a conviction that I've met again and again is that SF can somehow tap that power, zap through all the forgettable chat and the lightweight social drama to make an experience that is pure radio.

It may be so, but I doubt it. Some fraction of the power, perhaps, but our attitudes to the medium have changed so much that Armageddon itself would probably become another part of the aural wallpaper.

Still, that fraction might well be worth trying for...

1978. Commercial radio is four years old, and at last some of the larger stations are tottering on the brink of profitability. I was just staggering out of a gruelling year of training for a job which I'd been told would take about three months of medium-range concentration. It turned out to be like conducting an orchestra blindfold from a unicycle, and it hadn't left me the space in my head for ambitions of authorship. My magnum opus, a dimly perceived saga in the form of a mess of notes and jottings, seemed to be permanently shelved.

The job might have been an excuse, I don't know. In any case, it saved me from having to face the fact that I couldn't see how to make the jump from scribbles of inspiration to functioning story. I knew how to pay lip-service to things like structure and characterisation, but not how to make them work. I didn't have any real feeling for writing; I was in love with the dream of having written. I wanted to be praised, I wanted to be famous; and as Shaw said, we all want to be admired without having the slightest intention of doing anything to deserve it.

When I said a while back that the commercial stations were the offspring of pirate radio, I wasn't trying to be flip; operators, or rather former operators, of pirate outfits provided the only pool of experience and expertise in the field outside of the BBC. It applied all the way from technical personnel across to management level, and many of the leading figures in today's commercial set-up can trace their careers back to the old offshore broadcasting days. Another hangover is the use -- in a couple of cases -- of obscure overseas banks to keep assets secure in case of sudden liquidation.

The pirates were used to makeshift conditions, and in those early underfunded days they had to be. One station equipped itself with decks and mixers from the local Tandy store. As the first couple of years went by, a kind of shake-out took place; those that weren't going to make it went to the wall, and those that were began to consolidate their position. Enter the IBA.

The Independent Broadcasting Authority were the people who were going to ensure that the commercials weren't going to become carbon copies of the pirates. The IBA has two functions: it provides and maintains the transmitters which are funded through rental payments by each of the stations, and it grants the licenses to operate, choosing between the prospectuses of competing groups as new areas open up or as old licenses expire.

The IBA left the Independents pretty much alone for the first few years; they were having enough problems with simple survival, but when the balance sheets started turning from red to black it was time for a gentle reminder of the promises set out in those four-year-old prospectuses.

Spoken word. Classical music. Minority interest. Religious content. Drama.

Drama was a good one. Most of the companies had slipped it in, and it made quite an impression. The problem was that, with the form of programming that the companies had been building, drama was very likely to be a switch-off; a long way from the enviously cited US station that had managed to build massive and faithful listening figures simply by playing the top ten discs all day from one to ten and then back to one again.

The old promises sat there like forgotten debts waiting to be paid, and nobody really knew how to start. There was nothing like this in the pirate tradition. The IBA gave some encouragement by offering to release secondary rental funds for worthy-sounding projects -- secondary rental being the IBA's skim of the profits once they got above a certain level. It effectively meant that 'prestige' programming wouldn't actually cost anything, as it would involve

money that would otherwise have to be paid over to the licensing authority. Which was all very well... but how do you manage it so that you satisfy the IBA without driving away the customers you've so carefully lured to you?

A couple of places tried fifteen minute soap operas. Maybe they didn't stick with it for long enough, I don't know; but a soap has to become an obsession with a lot of people before it can really take off, and it didn't happen.

But, science fiction... perhaps SF could hit the right note.

A series of accidents, words passing through friends of friends, finally got me talking with a couple of people from Manchester's Piccadilly Radio about the possibility of getting an SF project floated. The omens were good and the need was there, but there were no existing channels through which it could be fulfilled. This was about six months prior to the beginning of the big 'Star Wars' boom, and sci-fi hadn't yet managed to elbow SF into the wings. I pulled together a half-hour pilot script for a six part serial out of the junkyard of the magnum opus, called it 'The Last Rose of Summer', and we begged and wheedled and crawled and finally managed to get enough actors to do the pilot for nothing, on the understanding that there would be work in it if the whole thing ever got off the ground.

We played the tape for the programme controller, and he loved it. It was a gift, just what he needed.

Shit. I was going to have to write another five episodes.

The budget was almost nothing, because profits weren't at a level where there was much to be clawed back from secondary rental. The producer, Tony Hawkins, was then a copywriter/producer in the advertising department and the engineer/effects man/dubbing mixer/composer was Pete Baker, a DJ with a BBC technical background. And as far as crew was concerned, that was about it.

The theme was that of a regime using stiff control of the media as a means of controlling a stratified populace -- as it were, pre-shaping the mind-set of the times to suit the administration. The title came from an old Polyphon recording used in a museum scene in Episode 1 to give the initial glimpse of a possible alternative. Pete Baker devised what was, as far as I'm aware, a completely new production technique for radio drama in that he started by getting a completely clean voice recording from the actors with no background, no modification, and no sound effects. These were recorded separately on the same cartridges that were used for commercials and jingles, pre-cued and with an instant start facility. They were added by running each of the scenes through Piccadilly's back up DJ console and mixing the whole thing much as an on-air show would be mixed. Everything had to be shifted out at intervals because the back up studio was used for the day's main news bulletins.

It was fast, it was neat, it was as flexible as you can get. By the time we got to *The Babylon Run*, the third and final plumbing of the m.o., the system was trimmed down as lean as it could possibly be -- two hours of radio in two days of rehearse/record, with not one of the scenes that could be called either simple or straightforward. Nine other stations had fallen on Piccadilly's drama output with loud gasps of relief, as running the serials rescued them from having to produce their own. We got syndication in Australia, and Corgi ran a novelisation of the first six episodes. (They missed out on the others by making a royal fuck up over the release dates. I've got the rights back.) Even Capital Radio overcame the traditional jealousy that exists between the major independents and ran *The Babylon Run*, although it was pressure from industrial action that was making desperate for material at the time.

We seemed to be doing something right. SF seemed to mesh with the needs of the medium perfectly. But...

Things have been changing since '78. A features department, a regular arts output. Almost, you might say, the start of a tradition. *The Babylon Run* was, we all had to agree, better written and better produced than those early, stumbling, ground-breaking episodes; but I still prefer them. I had a feeling that the first effort managed to tap the latent power of radio in some small way, and that SF was an indispensable element in the formula. The later stuff was okay, but I felt that it would have been just as competent and just as listenable if we'd been handling some other genre.

And if there's anything profound to be drawn from any of this, I fall short of being able to do it.

*

The system at the BBC was considerably different, unlike anything to be found anywhere in the ILR network. My first foot in the door at Portland Place had been a non-SF piece for *Saturday Night Theatre*, and it was during the preparation stages of this that we began to talk about the possibility of getting some SF onto Radio 4.

This would be late in 1978, early 1979 which (memory starts getting dodgy) I think was pre *Hitch-hiker's*. In fact, it was the slot script editor, Bernard Kricheski, who first came up with the idea of my doing something; I hadn't even raised the subject of SF, I suppose because of the Quatermass Heritage.

The Quatermass Heritage is my own name for an attitude towards SF that I believe to have existed within the BBC since the 1950s. Note that it's a prejudice that's entirely my own, and I'm not offering it here or anywhere else as a carefully worked out critical theory. It's an impression, that's all, and there are plenty of examples which contradict it. The impression is of a feeling that SF is an infantile escapist medium that doesn't have too much in common with the solid old values of good storytelling -- comic strip sci-fi which, let's face it, is a contention for which you could marshal a mountain of supportive examples if you were so inclined.

But -- and it's a biggie -- there's a concession that there's something in there worth saving, and all it needs is a truly professional writer (read: time-served media hack) to reach in there for it and incorporate it into something which the mass audience (read: mainstream) can comprehend and appreciate.

Putting it so baldly is doing the original *Quatermass* series a great disservice, as I think they were as good as the recent John Mills revival was bad. Besides, John Wyndham was producing work which seemed to be doing exactly what I've just set forward -- interpreting SF themes for a mainstream audience and bringing a mainstream literacy to the SF audience -- and the tracks that he was laying seemed too good not to follow.

Would that his followers were big enough to fill those tracks, though. Even now, when I hear the words 'top secret research project', I groan. Nothing wrong with it as a plot hook, just that I've seen and heard it so many times as a lead-in to a half-baked SF pastiche. Wyndham could do it then, Benford can do it now -- that is, work towards an SF premise from a basis of today's 'reality' -- but that doesn't mean that anybody could do it, just like getting on someone else's bicycle and riding to town.

My prejudices took a big knock when my outline got a good reception, though,

and the head of Radio 4 drama put his support behind the idea. (It usually hung on a hook behind his door. Joke.) It seemed pretty likely that the new magnum opus was going to get plundered of material just as the old one had.

The first proposal was for a twelve-part serial (aim high, and think of the repeat fees). Under the provisional title *Wingmen*, it centred on a big sub-light ship running in a straight line away from Earth. The purpose of the jaunt was to seek out and contact intelligent life, to which end most of the major corporations back home had invested money in the expectation of eventual new markets and first grabs at any alien technology. In the belly of the big ship were the wingships, two-man craft that were a handy size for darting down the nearest black hole in the direction of a promising signal (black holes not having been hammered to death as a plot device at the time). The thread running through all twelve episodes and coming to predominate at the end was a running intrigue on the main ship which seemed to indicate that the owning company didn't actually want an alien contact at all. The central episodes would concentrate on the away-from-home experiences of the wingmen, independently collecting pieces of evidence which, when assembled together, would effectively say 'this way to the BEMs'. In the end, surprise surprise, the owning company tries to destroy the wingmen and their finds, as actual contact would mean that the investment programme was no longer a bottomless drain down which the world would go on throwing its money; the company would have to quit taking and start handing out dividends.

For a while, it looked as though the serial form was really in the running. The BBC were turning over the possibility of launching a co-production with a US radio station and SF -- good old SF, with that mystical mainline back to the great days of radio -- was looking pretty attractive as means of doing it.

In the end I think -- and this is only about 10% information and 90% supposition -- that *Wingmen* lost out in favour of a BBC participation in the *Star Wars* serial. Even so, I suspect that this participation was much more limited in the end than had originally been intended. The outline wasn't wasted, though, because I was asked to consider condensing it down to a Hi-Fi theatre slot. I wrote the play, now titled *An Alternative to Suicide*, with a two hour running time, at which point the slot was cut to ninety minutes. I had this horrifying vision of polishing down and polishing down until I was left with nothing bigger than a 'Morning Story'. As it happened, the final rewrite was beneficial, because the jump down from six hours to two had whacked the story way out of shape, and a half-hour cut was big enough to force me to rethink the organisation of it.

I was in the studio for the first day of recording. Techniques were vastly different from those we'd used at Piccadilly; the BBC approach was -- and, as far as I know, still is -- to get all effects, atmosphere and dialogue onto the tape in a single take. Effects were lifted almost invariably from EP-sized discs, transferred to tape when necessary for a tight cue. The library of discs is vast and comprehensive; I'm reliably informed that you can get a horse farting if you need it. It all seemed a bit old-fashioned, but I suppose new motoring technology doesn't affect you until the old car's seen the last of its usefulness, either.

I didn't stay too long. Writers always get invited to attend these things even though there's nothing they can usefully do; you stand around feeling rather like an old boyfriend of the bride at a wedding. In the old *Last Rose* days I'd even got to do a bit.

Of the reviews that I saw, one was over-the-moon enthusiastic (Observer), another was cautiously approving (The Listener) and the other was wearily

indifferent (*The Times*). The last of these seemed to be taking the definite stance that anything which is SF can't, by definition, be considered as a serious piece of work might be considered. 'Not much of a play' is the phrase that sets me smiling whenever a new printers' dispute threatens to put *Times* journalists, radio critic included, out on the breadline; sorry guys, but even the most placid among us can discover a cruel streak if we're prodded. Criticism I can take (with tears, maybe, but I can take it), but pre-criticism born of an attitude of cultural elitism doesn't help anybody. It most of all doesn't help the medium of radio; although, as I said at the beginning of this piece, I believe that its slow dying as a dramatic form is inevitable, I've no wish to see it propelled down that road to end in a specimen jar on some poseur's shelf. Perhaps that's why SF is so often cited as being ideal to release some of the stored energy of the medium, because its very popularity is a counter to that earnest, enlightened worthiness that so many critics seem to be seeking.

*

So why, you may be wondering, did I invest so much of my time and energy in a form of writing that I believe to be on the slow slide? I mean, I wrote for radio quite happily, but you'd have been hard pressed to catch me actually listening to any of it...

First, I have to say that this feeling has grown in me since the time when I was producing the scripts. Then, I probably believed that I was going to revive the good old days and bring back the audiences single-handed. But the real value of the effort lay, not in my contribution to the art of radio, a contribution that's been quickly swallowed and largely forgotten, but in radio's contribution to me.

It was a writing school that I was actually being paid to attend. Far more valuable than the advice of script editors and producers was the opportunity to get something out there in public view, because then I began to look at it through the public's eyes and to understand that my polished little creations, so perfect when they left me, had at best a dull shine which could stand a lot more work and improvement. I missed the days of the old SF magazines, but I imagine they served writers in a similar way; somewhere to get comfortable with the basics, to practice, to polish, to get encouragement as they learned -- and to get paid as they did it.

Writing, as I'll tell anyone who'll listen (get something into print and you'll immediately recognise a similar rush of self-importance and an inclination towards pedagogy) can't be taught, but it has to be learned. Most writers get better with practice, but the outlets are getting fewer as a small number of slick magazines come to dominate on the newsstands and publishers are fine-tuning their lists of authors-in-print in the way that a punter assesses form. Writers' Circles and fan publications can be a help but, believe me, they can't be a substitute.

Unless you can hit the market with a fully-crafted first novel in which you leap from greenhorn to maestro between the drafts, it seems to me that radio is as good a place in which to take your first tottering steps as any. I'm still in love with the dream of having written, but now I appreciate all the sweat that has to precede it. Which isn't to say that I've arrived, as I'm now a 'new bug' trying to get a handle on the novel form, but I think that radio has got me part of the way along to where I want to be. With its heavy dependence on language and the opportunity for long-haul pacing and development I'd suspect that it gives a groundwork at least as good as that of the short

story; maybe better, as I think a good short is so tough to do that it ought to be left until you've sighted-in your bow on larger targets.

And it's still very much a writer's medium. Directors are interpretive artists, not prone to the delusion that they're the true creators with writers being mere assistants in the process; in the end it's the words and the words alone that carry the fire. As far as SF is concerned this is ideal -- science fiction lifted from the page and adapted for films and TV has a long history of being devalued and distorted by the handling it receives in the production process.

For keeping it pure, let's hear it for the blind man's movies.

Besides, the pictures are so much better...



REASSESSMENTS



'WHERE LATE THE SWEET BIRDS SANG'

Jim England

This is a well-thought-of novel by Kate Wilhelm which won the Hugo as the best of 1976. It has not been reviewed in *Vector* previously, but has recently been reprinted by Timescape; while I would like to say something nice about it, I can't. Its worst faults are blatant padding, implausibilities and sheer addled writing, and its treatment of its theme, the cloning of human beings, would be more appropriate to a third-rate woman's magazine.

Chapter One opens with a cloyingly folksy account of the growth to manhood of a child, David, amongst his upper-middle class American relatives and of his relationship with a cousin, Celia, couched in a style that is completely thing-oriented (with a particular concentration on the cosy sights and smells of food). When David was fifteen, it seems, Celia broke his arm; a year later, they "tore the clothes off each other" in a fight and Celia hit him on the head "with a rock". When David is twenty-three, however, they suddenly decide that they are in love with each other after all; but Celia is preparing to spend three years in Brazil teaching the farmers how to farm, and still wants to go. So David, who's been through Harvard and Oxford and ought to be able to act in a more mature fashion, walks all afternoon to get away from her, only to find at dusk that she is right behind him. She picks up a handful of dirt and enthuses about Brazilian farming: "I have so much to give! Can't you understand that?" Dropping the dirt, she wipes her tear-stained face with the same hand, and it gets dirty (naturally), so he kisses the dirt away, and so on. Two pages later, the chapter closes with the slick surprise that the world will end in "two to four years at the most". There are only another 27 chapters to go.

Chapter Two starts with David shaking his head "helplessly", since he has been blithely unaware of this fact -- "That's crazy!" he says, "What are you talking about?" So Grandfather, who is only a farmer but has "the head of a giant" and has read more books "than anyone else David knew", says: "You listen to me, David. You listen hard..." And he explains that, all over the world, there are famines and "plagues that we don't know anything about", and that "England's changing into a desert" (but hasn't David been to Oxford?), and that there's radiation everywhere -- "God knows where all of it's coming from." And there are shortages of all sorts of things, even chlorine -- "Chlorine, by God!" says Grandfather, as well he might -- and the world generally is going down the tube, suffering from any and every disaster you care to name. Grandfather (who has "great bulging biceps" too) has of course been very wise to have realised this, and is proved right in the next few pages. (The glaciers come down from the north later in the novel, just to make sure.)

So what does this large, comfortable, upper-middle class American family do? Well, Wilhelm is a bit coy about giving us the details, but it appears that, in no time at all, they have built themselves a Sanctuary wherein they can be self-sufficient, conduct research, and produce large numbers of clones of themselves. (The only original idea in all this is the half-baked one that cloned people would be mysteriously different from ordinary people.) They regard themselves as possessed of a licence to kill intruders. The love affair of David and Celia is followed by the love affairs of their descendants. The outside world is more or less forgotten but, every so often, Wilhelm devotes herself to describing boat journeys of incredible boredom up or down river in search of something that is never found (surely the worst example of padding). Other events -- such as a fire, the cause of which is never discovered -- are thrown in from time to time in an attempt to pep things up, but whenever something really needs explaining she launches into one of countless descriptions of the weather, telling us over and over again that people are either too hot or too cold, shivering or sweating, hungry or not hungry, the style of which banalities is exemplified by such phrases as "They sang some more" and "They walked some more." It's apparent, at least to me, that Wilhelm herself had become tired of it all long before the end.

In short, the whole thing is odious: pure Mickey Mouse, as phoney as a plastic lemon. For *Where Late The Sweet Birds Sang* to be printed, reprinted, and given the Hugo as the best SF novel of its year, there must be something distinctly rotten in the state of Denmark.



WORK IN PROGRESS

Stefan Lewicki

'Feminism and Science Fiction' is the working title of my research. My reading interests lie mainly in the modern period and are not limited to SF: slowly I became aware that women were writing some of the most thought-provoking novels. This was closely followed by my discovery of feminist SF. More women seemed to be writing SF than I'd previously been aware of, and at the same time SF writers were striving to achieve more polished and literary qualities in their work. Several differing strands in literature seemed to be coming together, and I formulated my research project as an attempt to explore and document this phenomenon in greater depth. Are women writing more SF? Why have feminists taken to SF to explore their ideas in fiction? What are their concerns, and how are they presented? How good is feminist science fiction?

Feminists are dissatisfied with relations between men and women on all levels (some men are too) so feminist SF is an exploration of various possible futures, and of how men and women may be capable of relating in non-sexist, non-hierarchical and non-oppressive ways, or not. Out of these future visions come ideas about how to operate now, with the aim of moving towards that better future. Some authors have gone into this quite deeply, exploring ways in which it might be possible for men and women to co-exist on a basis of true equality, neither oppressing the other or their environment -- I'm thinking, for example, of the visions of Marge Piercy in *Woman on the Edge of Time*, and of Ursula Le Guin in *The Dispossessed*. It's obvious that some major changes in society are called for, but after reading these novels, and others I'll mention, it's hard to avoid the implication that there is something that can be done here and now. It's an easy option to call feminist visions utopian, but this seems to avoid the issue, since the most important contribution of feminism to modern ideas is, I feel, to make personal change a prerequisite to any meaningful social progress.

I'm highly aware of being in the problematic position of being a man researching into a feminist topic, and of possible reactions to this by feminists, and men too. I sympathise with what feminism wants to achieve and realise that change in men is equally as important as that which women are striving to achieve in themselves. Anti-sexist politics is something I'm personally committed to and there are many ways in which people react to this, often depending on whether they are male or female: sometimes I find it useful to explain my attitudes in detail, and sometimes it's futile. Basically I feel that the traditional ways in which men and women relate to each other, and their images of each other, are, it would seem, increasingly unsatisfactory for a variety of reasons: my experience and that of people I know emphasises this, as well as the abundant evidence from other sources. Questions come thick and fast: how do men and women see each other? what has changed? what is unsatisfactory and what can be done about it? As I work on my project I feel a conflict between my personal convictions and enthusiasms, and the art of academic research, which demands objectivity, rationality, a certain sceptical approach. On a practical level, I hope I'm working towards an M.Phil./Ph.D. thesis.

Though a student at North East London Poly, and consequently with access to the amazing facilities of the Science Fiction Foundation, I actually live in and work from Lancaster where I've been for the last three years, visiting London regularly to be supervised by Arnold Harvey at NELF, and Patrick Parrinder at Reading.

At present SF seems to be an ideal forum for imagining new ways of structuring society, and new ways in which men and women could relate to each other. The novels and stories I've read so far seem to classify themselves according to whether they accept and explore the future of heterosexual relations, or totally reject the male world and explore 'separatism'. This is not such a limiting division as it initially seems, because although the works which explore the future in male and female terms may have more practical implications, those works which may conveniently be labelled 'separatist' seem to probe more deeply the question of what the essence and potential of woman is. I feel it's important to point out that SF novels and stories with a significant feminist content are by no means only written by women. John Varley's novels *Titan* and *Wizard*, and his short story 'Options', Samuel Delany's *Dhalgren* and *Triton*, and Theodore Sturgeon's *Venus Plus X* all explore the same problems as Marge Piercy, Ursula Le Guin, and others. Novels about women discovering themselves and their potential in worlds without men include Joanna Russ's *The Female Man*, Sally Gearheart's *The Wanderground*, Suzy McKee Charnas's *Motherlines*, Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland* among many. Unfortunately, so far the nearest I've read to a male counterpart of any of these is Philip Wylie's *The Disappearance*: very limited and a very long time ago!

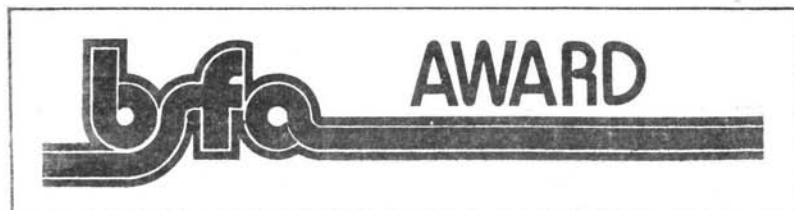
My research attempts to follow through from theory into practice (i.e. the fictional representation of ideas) but the two are closely linked in such a way that work on either provides feedback to the other, and on the entire piece of work: a homeostatic cycle, as it were. It has been necessary to investigate recent feminist theory in considerable depth, familiarising myself with its various tendencies and directions, and also to abstract themes and ideas to which feminist theorists give emphasis, concerning changes they want to happen in the world, and which therefore we might look for in feminist SF. Following on from this, I'm at present working on the links between women and science fiction, tracing from its beginning to now, in an effort to understand why women seem to be writing so much good SF. The next stage will be a detailed consideration of the recent corpus of feminist (a loose term at the present, I admit) SF, to see if the themes and ideas expected do occur, how they are considered and what conclusions are reached, compared with the theory. Topics include the existence and structure of the family unit in the future, alternative arrangements for childrearing and childcare, the division or not of labour, and relationships between the sexes, as well as the overall organisation of society at many levels. At present I've a growing list of novels and short stories by women and men which explore these themes and others from a feminist viewpoint, with varying degrees of complexity and sensitivity.

An important question that will need considering is just how far any of these fictions can be taken as practical suggestions for redesigning society, and reforming our deep-seated attitudes, or are they merely another part of the utopian tradition, which has complex links with SF, merely reflections of the wants and needs of a particular group of people at a particular time? Feminism may be saying that each person can work on an individual level towards a collective utopia by changing him- or herself, whereas in the past other visions became utopian, and took on the connotation of impossibility precisely because of the need for a massive and instantaneous transformation of everything: the transition couldn't be imagined, so the whole assumed an airy impracticability. But then, where do separatist utopias fit in, in all this? How didactic can SF or any literature be, anyway? And then what about a literary judgement of the writings?

Problems occur, it seems, when one is tackling what is a relatively new and unresearched phenomenon. More and more SF is being published, and this makes it difficult to keep track of the available material, because it's not possible to read all that comes out with a view to becoming familiar with the field. Science fiction is such an umbrella term that I have to restrict myself to surveying a certain kind of speculative fiction. I'm forced into being selective, and with this, of course, comes the possibility of missing something useful. Getting hold of new material is difficult, especially given that much new fiction is first published in the United States, and there is no guarantee of a reasonably rapid British edition. If it's imported -- by no means certain -- this means scouring obscure bookshops. The nature of the SF retailing market means that the sort of books I'm interested in aren't as widely available as others. I'm sure the same is true of SF criticism. This is one of the reasons why the Science Fiction Foundation library is so useful: there is a regular influx of new books of all kinds from all over the world -- the first thing I check on my regular visits. They also have a vast collection of now unavailable literature -- SF publishing is notoriously ephemeral. I'm constantly discovering books and authors I've never heard of. (Being an ardent Philip K Dick fan, among other sins, I instantly looked to see if they had a copy of his 1957 novel *Cosmic Puppets*, the only novel of his I haven't read. They didn't. I've been after it for years, so if anyone out there knows of a library with a copy, let me know.)

Researching a new area seems to give more scope for originality, but less to measure oneself against or compare oneself with. It's harder but more challenging to have to develop my own guidelines. But how objectively can anyone judge what is after all a movement still very much in progress? Most of the writing that I'll limit myself to considering comes from the period 1974 - 79.

In compensation for all these difficulties is the possibility of making interesting discoveries. I've found there is more critical attention being given to SF, and to the roles and images of women in SF than I thought (the journal *SF Studies* is particularly good) while at the same time there are many uncharted areas waiting to be explored... sexuality in SF, male images in SF... I've even come across a couple of magazines devoted to publishing and criticising feminist SF: one from the States called *Windhaven* and the first issue of the London based *Crystal Crone*. The main gain at the moment seems to be that I've found and read a lot of really imaginative and thought-provoking science fiction which is also well written, on subjects I have strong feelings about. SF also seems to be the only medium within which it is possible to explore, in an imaginative fashion and on a human level, the effects of various changes which are being, or will soon be, brought about by decisions taken now, in everyone's name. Good SF can, I feel, help people make a more informed choice about the sort of world they want. This is attributing a didactic role to speculative fiction, which I think it must have, but my reading confirms to me that this does not detract from its other qualities as literature.



DON'T FORGET TO VOTE....



STANDPOINT

SO, WHO NEEDS CHARACTERS ANYWAY?

Chris Bailey

Issue 103 of *Vector* featured a substantial exegesis of the SF of Doris Lessing by Andy Sawyer. I confess to having read only *Shikasta* of the *Canopus in Argos* cycle and so, without wishing to directly rebut anything Andy said, I still feel that this particular book also deserves a more critical scrutiny. It is certainly a remarkable work of fiction: placid and wrathful by turns, the action varying from the cosmic stage to the domestic, at one moment focussing on the individual and the next on the whole of mankind, it

has had a massive effect upon many readers; and yet, although it intermittently involved and stirred me, when all was said and done I was left feeling strangely unmoved.

Shikasta seems to me to approach, if not quite to attain, the status of works such as *Ulysses* or *Paradise Lost*, books which are so massively self-universal as to defy the critic to get to grips with them. Indeed, the comparison with *Paradise Lost*, though it cannot be sustained for very long, makes a useful starting point. To all intents and purposes, Canopus is God, both in its all-seeing and benevolent nature and in the way it initiates specifically Biblical events -- Noah's Ark, Sodom and Gomorrah. Shammât is the Devil, "Shammât the greedy, whose poison is at work in the minds and bodies of every Shikastan" (Granada edition, p.225). We are Adam and Eve, the erring individuals, caught in this cosmic conflict which on the microcosmic level can be taken as a metaphor of our higher faculties at war with our baser instincts.

But the way in which this is put to us in *Shikasta* seems to me to be somewhat simplistic and arouses in my mind notions of the medieval scholastic debate between free will and predestination, Lessing coming down heavily on the side of predestination. The waiting souls in Zone Six chant "Eye of God / Watching me / Pay my fee / Set me free", and that is just the sort of helpless feeling which the reader may be given in the first one hundred pages of the book, in which the Canopian emissary Johor relates the events of his initial tour of duty to Shikasta. Mankind rises from the mire with the assistance of the patronage of Canopus, whose benign influence is then disrupted by the discordant radiations of Shammât. (Interestingly enough, Canopus is the sort of civilisation which some traditional SF has shown us being overthrown, for all its power, by the vigorous young blood of Earth.) After this Fall, millennia of degeneration ensue in which the vital supplies of SOWF (Spirit-Of-We-Feeling) from Canopus diminish to a trickle. As the population grows there are fewer supplies of SOWF "to go around" (p.143), an idea which irritates me intensely, denying as it does the individual any innate capacity for fellow-feeling. Even our religions are founded for us, in order to foster our inadequate spirituality.

Eventually, after the cataclysmic events of our own era ("the Century of Destruction"), evil is shown to be self-defeating -- "The very process that Shammatt had set moving -- reducing, weakening, enslaving a large part of Shikasta's populations, this had reduced and weakened itself" (p.423) -- and paradise is regained.

Obviously, I do not find the God's eye panorama appealing when couched in such terms. You might say, well, *Shikasta* is presented as an alien textbook -- the Canopans cannot but help assume this stance. Fair enough, but the reader also sees his humanity being denied: "To identify with ourselves as individuals -- this is the very essence of the Degenerative Disease, and every one of us in the Canopean Empire is taught to value ourselves only insofar as we are in harmony with the plan, the phases of our evolution" (p.55).

To return for a moment to *Paradise Lost*, many critics have found the character of Satan to be the most fascinating feature of that work. "Better to reign in Hell than serve in Heav'n" --there's a grubby piece of human-like motivation to conjure with, and it vitally enriches Milton's vision. Here, much depends upon how Lessing has conceived the role of the autonomous character, for the macrocosmic panorama detailed above is far from being the whole substance of the book. Following the description of Johor's first visit to Shikasta during our prehistory there comes a long miscellany of documents which treat of the Century of Destruction. The theme here is that of ruined human potential, and Johor submits files on numerous unnamed individuals who have fallen by the way-side, unable to resist "the Shikastan drag and pull". As I see it, there is something of a paradox here; from having been the 'Natives', a minor prize in whatever inscrutable contest it is that Canopus and Shammatt are waging, the mess we have made of our planet can also be laid at the door of each and every one of us as individuals: "He succumbed. Furthermore, he knew that he was doing something wrong..." (p.99). Personally, I can't help resenting it when gods interfere in my evolution and then point the finger at me when something goes wrong.

The most interesting development of the book at this point, however, is the effective collapse of the formal pretence that this is indeed a selection from the Archives of Canopus; the tone, the standpoint, the obsessions, are all those of Doris Lessing, who is very much of this world. Johor ceases to exist -- he is taken over. Kevin Smith remarked to me that he was quite prepared to accept Johor/Lessing as a character; I am not, insofar as it breaks my suspension of disbelief. And yet it is when Lessing assumes explicit control that the writing moves up a gear and the strength and the power of the book is made manifest. As Andy Sawyer observed, "it is this anger and tragedy, rather than the SF imagery as such, which heightens the book". Which make it a more effective and moving book, yes, but, being demanding, I also insist that the book's moral lessons should be integrated into it in such a manner as to create a coherent artistic whole; the strength and the rightness of Lessing's feelings do not alone guarantee that this is a perfect work of fiction. This dichotomy between the book as a formal fiction and as a deeply personal statement of the author reaches its most extreme in the section (pp.246 - 257) entitled 'Additional Explanatory Information, II':

"Look, look, quick! -- behind the seethe and scramble and eating that is one truth, and behind the ordinary tree-in-autumn that is the other -- a third, a tree a fine, high, shimmering light, like shaped sunlight. A world, a world, another world, another truth..."

Compare that sub-title and the actual writing! It is a brilliant and a painful hymn to human despair and transitory hopes which compassionately encompasses all life, and in its tentative assertion of the need for courage and faith, I take it to be a passage that is of central importance to the book, for otherwise *Shikasta* is, as Andy Sawyer said, bleak in its view of man. "Creatures

infinitely damaged, reduced and dwindled" (p.257) indeed, but also capable of laughter, love and sublime artistic statements; perhaps it is a sense of such balance that I miss most of all.

I am aware that the above arguments are stricken by some self-inflicted wounds; I am revealing myself as a soggy traditionalist, not scared of innovatory forms but seeking a sense of inner discipline beneath them, and above all wanting to learn about the weaknesses and strengths of the characters, and therefore of myself, from their own inner development. The macrocosmic vision is not for me; I err towards solipsism. The book seeks cosmic causes and reasons -- "The reek of blood going up from this planet must be in somebody's nostrils" -- but gods, even when revealed, may not see fit to explain their motives. The Canopus Archivists observe that "Shikastans spend a good part of their time being surprised at each other's behaviour and commenting on it". Well, yes, we do, so when Rachel Sherban writes in her journal of the misery she sees about her amongst the poor of Morocco, "I can't stand any of this. I can't understand it", I can understand that, because I feel that I have grown to understand her as a hurting and a caring individual and her cry affects me in a way that the statements of the omniscient Canopans, for all their truth, cannot.

I reiterate that *Shikasta* is a remarkable book and urge you to get hold of a copy of the Granada paperback edition (448 pp, £1.95) and to explore it for yourself; your time will not be wasted. I admire it more than I have perhaps let on, but cannot rid myself of the lurking suspicion that at the heart of Doris Lessing's vision there may exist a vacuum instead of a solid kernel. There are further volumes to come: we shall see.

DISTINGUISHED AUTHORS FROM THE 'FOREIGN' LANDS

Brian W Aldiss

Andy Sawyer's article on Lessing's novels (*Vector* 103) is excellent, although I wouldn't have minded if he had sounded even more enthusiastic. Doris Lessing's work is of great importance (and 'beguiling', to employ her own word in the preamble to *The Sirian Experiments*). But also interesting within the *Vector* ambience is to see how SF readers welcome a distinguished author from the foreign lands of mainstream fiction. The response is often muted and not seldom hostile. Let us hope that Lessing will be warmly received. Fans might do worse than start with Volume 3 of the *Canopus in Argos* series, *The Sirian Experiments*, as I did. It is a work of stature and very confidently science fiction. It is not at all my impression that Lessing uses SF tropes "in a naive way", as Paul Dembina says ('Letters', *Vector* 104), although he uses the expression with regard to Volume 1, *Shikasta*, which seems somewhat more hesitant in its commitment to colonial space empires than Volume 3.

It is now no rare thing for authors to turn to science fiction for a sense of freshness, and for the freedom one breathes like a wind off the sea when having decided to set a novel in the future. The other most noteworthy author is Kingsley Amis, long a stalwart defender and anthologist of SF; his *Russian Hide-and-Seek* is just available in Penguin. That relish-of-awfulness which is an enduring strand of SF is strikingly present in Amis's portrait of the English Democratic Republic fifty years from now, when we are sunk so low we reject our own culture.

Doris Lessing is as committed to SF as Amis, with her roots in the *mode* (not merely a *genre*) going back to *The Golden Notebooks*. Amis epitomises the English English novelist; Lessing with her African background, her committedness, and her rather forbiddingly 'serious' reputation, is a different kettle of fish. But if anyone has doubts about her feelings for SF, read first the

introductions to the Canopus series; she is almost embarrassingly generous to our surrealist rubbish dump (yes, yes, I know there are exceptions... Four...)

Let me press the case of *The Sirian Experiments*, which appeared on this year's Booker Prize short list at the same time as Lessing's name came up for the Nobel Prize, and the film of *Memoirs of a Survivor* opened in West End cinemas.

Of course, one has to read Canopus with both eyes open. Then the fascination of watching Ambien II, in *The Sirian Experiments*, discover that her much-vaunted empire is coarse, self-deceiving, limited, is powerful and oddly touching, for we apply the discovery, as we are meant to, to ourselves. I agree with Sawyer: though the performance may seem cold, there is great passion underneath it. Intellectual passion. It is with almost guilty pleasure that we visit an enormous galactic empire where for once brute hardware does not prevail above humanity.

AN OPEN LETTER TO MY COLLEAGUES IN SCIENCE FICTION

John Brunner

In August the British newspaper *The Guardian* reported an appeal, signed by West and East German authors, calling for an end to the arms race and for immediate disarmament talks. They appealed for "joint action to prevent Europe from becoming the nuclear theatre of a new and final world war" and rejected "the criminal idea" that a limited nuclear war could be waged and won. Among the signatories were Heinrich Boll and Gunter Grass from West Germany, Stefan Heym and Hermann Kant from East Germany. The appeal was said to be supported by writers' unions in France, Italy, Holland, Finland and Yugoslavia, and at least one signatory was Russian.

We in science fiction, living so much of our lives in the future, have better reason than most to look forward to a day when it will be as inconceivable to settle international disputes by resorting to war as we would now think it to burn someone at the stake for wanting to hold a different kind of religious service.

But that day will never come so long as we tolerate the arms race, so long as we live in this hair-trigger world of ICBMs, cruise missiles, neutron bombs and the rest.

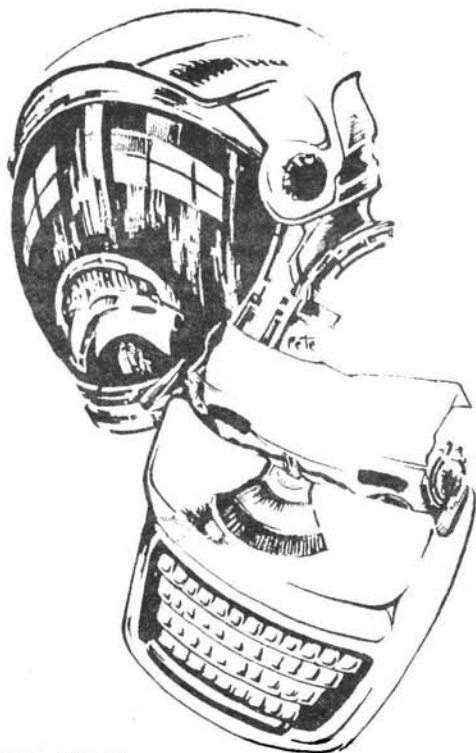
I am certain that many people involved in science fiction writing, editing and publishing would wish to associate themselves with this appeal. If those who do would care to write to me at the address below, preferably before 1 January 1982, expressing their agreement and mentioning their connexion with the science fiction field, I will arrange for their support to be publicised and send their letters where they will do the most good. Thank you.

JOHN BRUNNER, THE SQUARE HOUSE, PALMER STREET, SOUTH PETHERTON, SOMERSET,
TA13 5DB.

This letter arrived in September, just after the last BSFA mailing had been put together. It was, of course, circulated to other publications and to individuals in the science fiction field. In a letter in *The Guardian* (21 November) John Brunner reported that he had received expressions of support from France, Italy and Britain, and hoped to be able to publish an account of the response in the new year. One of the expressions of support was from me, incidentally. Not in the Gunter Grass class, of course, but it may help. Kevin Smith

Book Reviews

Reviews Editor:
Joseph Nicholas



Kate Wilhelm - JUNIPER TIME (Arrow, 280pp, £1.60)

Reviewed by Chris Morgan

You must have noticed the undiluted spirit of pessimism which prevails these days in the better near-future novels. Something very nasty always seems to be happening (or about to happen) to planet Earth and the human race. I don't just mean the coming of alien invaders, who are frequently rather jolly, if enigmatic, as they overthrow our systems of government, enslave our minds, rape our women, and so on, but who at least provide a target at which the people of Earth can gallantly shoot back. No, the really pessimistic near future is one where, due to ecological blunders, excess population or some fairly subtle natural disaster, living conditions are going downhill irreversibly and at an accelerating pace. It's all horribly believable. The archetypal novel of this kind is, of course, John Brunner's The Sheep Look Up. Frederick Pohl has assumed a deteriorating Earth environment in both Gateway and Jem, as has Gregory Benford in Timescape. There are many other recent examples.

In her earlier novels, Kate Wilhelm has postulated some very bleak futures - particularly in Where Late the Sweet Birds Sang (which won her a Hugo) and Faultlines. In Juniper Time (set about twenty or thirty years on) there is world drought: not severe enough to kill millions of people but sufficiently persistent to cause the US government to evacuate the populations of many of its drier western states, relocating millions of people in Newtowns - badly built instant slums, offering nothing but boredom and frustration. The reason for this drought is unknown but may be connected with a decrease in cosmic rays. As one character says: "We don't know enough. That's always our problem. We think the cosmic rays effect the Van Allen belt, and it in turn affects the

jet streams." The effects of the drought are most acutely felt in terms of food shortages (even in prosperous western countries), lower standards of living and very high levels of unemployment - a downward spiral in economic activity from which it seems impossible to escape. Fortunately, Kate Wilhelm provides no easy remedy for this situation, no last-page panacea; instead she offers hope, a reason for continuing the struggle.

That's just the background. The novel's plot is a complex one, involving cloak & dagger politics, space technology and language research. It is put across with surprising succinctness; nor does *Juniper Time* seem to suffer from any lack of detail. There are scenes at a university which, despite their brevity, show the politics of academic life and the tyrannical hold of professors over graduate students just as convincingly as Benford does in *Timescape*. The space scenes are equally brief and equally effective. Described in much more leisurely fashion are the new deserts of Oregon, where only juniper and sagebrush can survive.

To say what *Juniper Time* is about is not easy, though as with all of Kate Wilhelm's work there is great emphasis on characterisation. Certainly the novel is a chunk of the lives of its two main characters, including some details of their early years, when their families lived near each other and their fathers worked together in space, supervising the construction of space station Alpha. As soon as Arthur Cluny has achieved his PhD in astrophysics he is persuaded by a couple of all too shadowy friends to follow in his late father's footsteps and push for Alpha (which has been derelict for ten years) to be completed and used for research. Its re-establishment may boost international morale and may involve research which will help to end or alleviate the drought. Due mainly to his fortuitous marriage (to the daughter of a millionaire businessman), Cluny's attempt succeeds. In space, close to Alpha, a golden scroll is found, covered with symbols; it may be either a hoax or a message from aliens.

Somebody is needed who can translate an unknown language without even a Rosetta Stone. That person is Jean Brighton, the other main character, whose late father worked with Cluny's ten years earlier. But Jean Brighton has been dismissed from her university post (in essence, for being too successful), has undergone a harrowing period at a Newtown, and has travelled out to almost deserted Oregon to revisit her grandparents' house, which she has inherited. For a while she lives on a nearby Indian reservation with Robert Wind-in-the-Tall-Trees (whom she had known in her childhood) and his family. She learns to live with the desert - to accommodate herself to its needs. This ties in with the book's title: in order to survive the drought one must, like the juniper, have deep roots. Those people who are "uprooted" and moved to Newtowns shrivel up there - morally and mentally, at least. On the other hand, the Indians stay put and survive. Their "deep roots", though, are partly reserves of moral strength and knowledge.

The Indians are portrayed as noble savages. They come out as much better people than any of the other characters, being more trustworthy, better at healing, and able to outwit the white man's technology. At one point Kate Wilhelm realises that they are too good to be true and tries to defuse the image, but by then some credibility has been lost. Even so, the fact that Robert Wind-in-the-Tall-Trees is seeking to rediscover the old, lost ways of surviving without technology is very well conveyed. His wife Selena's abilities to help Jean both physically and mentally amount to a supernatural power.

The ways in which Arthur Cluny and Jean Brighton meet when in their teens, go their separate ways, prosper, suffer and then meet again are very well handled. Their contrasting attitudes to the drought and even to the mysterious golden message point up their personality differences. The golden scroll is a good creation, remaining enigmatic almost to the end.

At times the novel's succinctness leads to the use of cliches, where an extra hundred pages would have allowed space for the development of more originality. For example, Arthur Cluny's father-in-law is a typical millionaire with political pull; Cluny's friends Murray and Sid are mere ciphers; a few of the plot twists late on in the book are too obviously contrived. Jean's exceptional natural ability with computers and language interpretation is too convenient, but this talent is so carefully introduced in the first chapter, where her father tells her that one "can do magic with words", that Kate Wilhelm gets away with it. Although the writing is very nice in a careful, restrained style (Kate Wilhelm always seems to avoid flamboyance), achieving a variety of emotions and even evoking them in the reader, the double plotting is carried out with a notable lack of elegance or symmetry - the chunks of text dealing separately with the two main characters are too long.

Juniper Time is a satisfying novel (though rather a depressing one for much of its length). Too few SF books these days are actual novels, with a beginning, an end and some respectable character development in between, but Kate Wilhelm does not disappoint in this respect. She is a thoughtful and highly competent writer who can be relied upon to produce work that is worth reading. Certainly Juniper Time is worth reading. It's a more cohesive book than Where Late the Sweet Birds Sang and less of an eulogy to America's scenic wonders. Yes, Juniper Time is Kate Wilhelm's best novel to date.

Terry Carr (Ed.) - THE BEST SCIENCE FICTION OF THE YEAR #10 (Timescape, 434pp, \$3.50)

Reviewed by Brian Smith

Over the last decade, Carr has built this series into an institution, required reading for anyone interested in the state of the art of short-form science fiction. I think that a little hindsight may prove instructive. This anthology, its nine predecessors, and Carr's other "bests", The Best Science Fiction Novellas of the Year and The Year's Finest Fantasy #1 & 2, have together accrued 10 Hugos, 14 Nebulas (Nebulae?), at least 2 Jupiters and 6 Locus Awards. This in itself is no mean achievement, but if you are unimpressed by the ability to guess which way SFWA or the Worldcon membership will jump, then I will add that in my opinion the list of stories wherein vox populi coincides with vox Carr is more impressive than that in which they differ. I don't think there has been a single volume without at least half a dozen really good stories, and #10 is probably the best for at least two years. It contains twelve stories at all sub-novel lengths, Carr having abandoned the companion best novellas series, apparently due to reader demand.

Now, where to begin...? Why not with the inevitable story by John Varley (he hasn't missed a Best since #4)? 'Beatnik Bayou' is part of Varley's future history, and therefore contains lots of tightly plotted and logically developed social and technological extrapolation, marred by appallingly standardised characters. I swear Varley stamps them out of a mould (one of Heinlein's, I think). Also, Varley's story suffers greatly by comparison with Michael Swanwick's 'Ginungagap'. Pace, setting up a space-borne near future society in a couple of paragraphs, credible characterisation, Swanwick can do anything that Varley can, only he does it well. There's something about the idea of a space station called Arthur C Clarke being nicknamed 'Mother' that really appeals to me. I wish he'd written Titan.

Also on familiar ground are Philip K Dick and Barry Malzberg. Dick's 'Frozen Journey' is an exercise in paranoia and ontology centred on a starship colonist facing ten years of continuous consciousness, while Malzberg's 'Le Croix (The Cross)' is an exercise in alienation and despair whose protagonist repeatedly experiences the lives and deaths of religious leaders. Both stories are typical examples of their author's outputs, and good examples of them.

As a refreshing change from the usual Americans-conquer-the-galaxy scenario, Suzy McKee Charnas's excellent 'Scorched Supper on New Niger' features a richly evoked trading culture settled by black Africa, in a story of high adventure and low morals, well-paced, well-characterised and at times very funny, as is this year's Nebula novelette winner, Howard Waldrop's 'The Ugly Chickens', the story of a young ornithologist who sets out to prove that the dodo is alive and well and living in the Deep South.

Two disappointments were F Gwynplaine MacIntyre's 'Martian Walkabout', which began brilliantly, promising a searing attack (via the character of an Aborigine astronaut) on the contamination and exploitation with which man destroys less advanced cultures, but then faded dismally to a poor ending; and Clifford D Simak's 'Grotto of the Dancing Deer', a bland retread of ground covered many years ago ('The Gnarly Man' (1939) by L Sprague de Camp springs to mind). Why it won a Nebula this year I cannot imagine.

George R R Martin's 'Nightflyers' is a dark, moody murder mystery about a ship bound to intercept a mysterious alien race. Zenna Henderson's 'Tell Us A Story' is another chapter in her saga of The People. Though it is as warmly human as its predecessors, and less sentimental (and the better for it) I cannot help but wonder if there is much more mileage to be had out of The People. They seem either to meet good humans and befriend them or to meet bad humans and get killed as witches. In total contrast is Bob Leman's 'Window', a quite horrible little story about a malfunctioning Government experiment containing the raw material for a really good nightmare.

Last, and most assuredly not least, is the exquisite 'Slow Music' by James Tiptree Jr. Set in what may be the last days of mankind, it is a glorious, lyrical celebration of what it means to be human. It is quite possibly the most beautiful thing that I have ever read. It is also one of the finest stories that Tiptree has ever written, and that is not a claim that I make lightly.

Carr's editorship continues to set the highest standards. The only complaint I might make is that his introductory paragraphs to each story have moved away from the authors to the stories, and consequently a few of the plots are strongly and unnecessarily telegraphed. As a rule, Carr's Best SFs are a good pointer to the health of the short fiction market. This year's prognosis is definitely favourable. Go out and get this one, and if you're missing any of the others, get those too. They are a definitive library of the best SF from the early 70s to the present day, and I recommend them all to you most highly.

Stanislaw Lem - SOLARIS/THE CHAIN OF CHANCE/A PERFECT VACUUM (King Penguin, 543pp, £3.50)

Reviewed by Andy Sawyer

All of a sudden there's mileage in being Polish, and now that this three-in-one volume has been published by Penguin as part of their revamped deluxe King Penguin line, I can't help wondering if all the media attention given that country is going to stir up a bit of extra interest in Poland's foremost SF writer.

For most people, Lem is the author of SOLARIS, the basis of Tarkovsky's film. Forget the film! It is a masterpiece (although Lem himself is reported as disliking it) but the book by Lem is not "the book of the film". It came first, and must be judged as itself. It's closer to traditional 'hard' SF than the film, for a start, full of discussions about scientific theory, playing with it, getting excited by it, using it as a metaphor, perhaps, but never allowing it to evaporate to hazy symbolism. Like a metaphysical poem, SOLARIS takes up an idea and makes it an experience; making a representative image as interesting and exciting as that which it represents.

As you may remember, the planet Solaris is virtually covered by an ocean which may or may not be sentient. Kelvin, a researcher, joins the team on the planet to find it harried by 'visitors' - materialised phantoms representing their secret obsessions and guilts. He is 'visited' by his wife Rhexa, who killed herself ten years previously. The 'visitors' may be emanations from the planet engaging in some sort of communication: they may even be weapons. They share memories and personality with the 'original'. They can be killed, with difficulty, but reincarnate soon afterwards. Kelvin finds himself emotionally shattered by the appearance of "Rhexa" (for whose suicide he feels himself, with some justification, responsible). "She" (take the quotation marks in the rest of the sentence for granted) is increasingly obsessed by her own awareness of her ersatz nature.

Behind this plot is an unsettling and at times explosive parable about human aspiration and how far our own human nature can stand in the way of really knowing something with which it shares no point of contact. Solaris has inspired a whole new corpus of science with its ideologies, orthodoxies and heresies, as researcher after researcher delves into the enigma. Is the planet sentient? If so, on what level is this sentience? Are the forms it produces biological or chemical, random or purposeful? And whatever the answer, is it knowable by man? This kind of sensibility - of attempting to understand what one may not be capable of understanding - approaches tragedy and comedy simultaneously. Lem is a great if sardonic humourist (his catalogue of Solarian studies reminiscent of Swift's Laputian 'Academy of Lagado') but the tragedy of the situation is horrific. Kelvin's 'manifestation' of the wife he forced to suicide is made more powerful by the implied shift of viewpoints between narrator and 'visitor'. The 'reality' of the Rhexa-figure only goes so far: she has memories, feelings, but little or no existence independent of her creator. How far, though, is she unreal? Whatever her origin, she feels and her feeling is that although she is Rhexa it is increasingly brought to her consciousness that she is also an artificial creation. This leads to the inevitable tragedy. Imagine that feeling! Only Philip K Dick, of all other SF writers, could approach that interface.

Kelvin elects to remain on Solaris. All this frenetic intellectual activity must be absurd. But it may lead to something. Between the tyranny of a closed system and the nihilism of failure there must be something between resignation and expectation. We can be heroes. Just for one day. SOLARIS is a marvellous novel, haunting, challenging, questioning.

Like SOLARIS, THE CHAIN OF CHANCE details an investigation of something which can very probably lead to no solid result. In this case, however, we have a detective case with just enough near-future trappings to qualify as SF. The narrator - a second-rate astronaut - is investigating a series of deaths at an Italian clinic which have produced a proliferation of theories from 'no connection' to 'a well-planned conspiracy'. When you don't know what you are looking for, any event - a woman's epileptic fit in a suspiciously deserted store, a terrorist attack at an airport, the purchase of a bag of almonds - may or may not be significant. The knot is unravelled, as in all the best detective tales, by a rigorous application of scientific logic: the fact that in this case the logic in question is that of probability and coincidence is what gives the story its Borgesian flavour and what adds intellectual spice to the suspense. Dramatising a scientific concept rather than a gimmick, CHAIN explores the interface between 'random' and 'significant' events (which results in the apparent paradox of the event which is virtually impossible taken as itself and virtually preordained taken as part of a series) in a cool, ironic prose and with a precise attention to detail which is somehow immensely satisfying to read.

A PERFECT VACUUM is Lem at his most cerebral: a collection of extended reviews

of imaginary books ranging from novels to works of philosophy. The Borgesian flavour of CHAIN is even more apparent, but also more ponderous. Some of the 'reviews' are brilliant/extended games; some heavy-handed parodies of the more pretentious literary tendencies; some, like Non Serviam, with its brilliant exploration of the science of 'personetics' or the creation of artificial intelligences, make you wish Lem had written the novel rather than the 'review'. But there's no point in me quibbling, for all these points and more have been explored at length in the first review in the collection, which is of A PERFECT VACUUM by Stanislaw Lem...

Lem is an extremely intelligent writer (not merely a 'clever' one). There are very few contemporary SF writers who actually use contemporary scientific theory rather than technology or extrapolation as the seeds for their stories. I would suspect that at the frontiers of knowledge (of whatever field) you spend most of your time confused, half-aware of a pattern which is seemingly destined to elude your grasp. Both SOLARIS and THE CHAIN OF CHANCE dramatise this. He is also a master of wit. A PERFECT VACUUM is the work of a powerful but playful intellect. Some of the jokes go on too long, some even fall flat, but taken in the right spirit he produces some clear rivals to Kilgore Trout. For my taste, though, Lem's wit works best when more closely integrated with the literature: it's difficult to think of any actually funny bits from THE CHAIN OF CHANCE, but through hint and allusion Lem builds up his picture of his middle-aged, balding astronaut-detective, an anonymous, second-rate parody of the hard-bitten gumshoe legend, denied everlasting fame thanks to hayfever, constantly running up blind alleys until the final kaleidoscopic section in which all his handicaps become factors which create his success.

SOLARIS is what will sell this book, and deservedly so. The two companion works, though, are by no means insignificant, and taken altogether this book is incredible value for money, even at £3.50. Lem's combination of a serious intelligence and exuberant satire make him a strong contender for the best science fiction writer around. It's that simple. Look, it might be out of print by Christmas. Get out and buy it now!

James Blish -- CITIES IN FLIGHT (Arrow, 607pp, £2.50)

Reviewed by Joseph Nicholas

This is the first British paperback printing of the one-volume edition published in the United States by Ace some years back, and if there's any justice in the world it won't be the last. For once, I agree with the blurb's claim that it is "one of the landmark works of science fiction": the story of the Okies, the cities which, following the development of antigravity 'spindizzies' and anti-agathic drugs which prolong life, left Earth to roam the galaxy -- "(seeking) work rather than thrones among the stars", to quote from Brian Aldiss's *Billion Year Spree*, and thus, as he says, "a significant step away from Campbell's power fantasy". And, twenty years on, it still holds up well... The inclusion between the same set of covers of all four volumes (*They Shall Have Stars*, *A Life for the Stars*, *Earthman*, *Come Home* and *A Clash of Cymbals* -- the latter appearing here under its original and more appropriate title of *The Triumph of Time*), allowing them to be read straight through, naturally enhances this overall, all-important tone, and it is complemented by an afterword by one Richard D Mullen drawing attention to the parallels between Blish's future history and the cyclical schema of Spengler's *The Decline of the West* on which it was based. The unfortunate thing about this article (which first appeared in *Riverside Quarterly*) is that it is really too short, too synoptic, and can only point to rather than fully explore these parallels, its detailed comparative chart aside (although unfortunately not as detailed as Blish's original chronology, the omission of which from this edition is to be regretted). One must hope that it serves to inspire the readers to undertake such exploration for themselves. But no matter: *Cities in Flight* is a book that you should not miss.

Robert L Forward -- DRAGON'S EGG (New English Library, 309pp, £1.50)

Reviewed by Roy Macinski

Let me, from the outset of this review, come out of the closet (so to speak) and admit that while I enjoy a wide cross-section of contemporary SF, I am something of a traditionalist in my tastes -- that is to say, I particularly enjoy my SF hard. It is from this perspective that I view *Dragon's Egg* as a bitter disappointment.

Ostensibly, the story deals with the discovery and investigation of a neutron star wandering through our solar system, but particularly focuses on the contact by the human exploration ship with a race of beings, known as the Cheela, who live on the surface of the star. Due to their environment, the Cheela live at a rate many millions of times faster than we. When contact is first established, their evolution is at an equivalent stage to our Stone Age; with the humans acting as their teachers, however, the Cheela rapidly develop an advanced culture and science and within the span of just one standard day become both socially and scientifically far more advanced than the humans orbiting their world.

Dr Robert L Forward, to give him his title, is a senior scientist at the Hughes Research Laboratories in Malibu, California. He has done much pioneering work in the fields of astronomy and physics, and is best known for his work in the field of gravitational physics. He has also, over the past few years, written a number of widely published speculative science articles, many of which have dealt with the more way-out aspects of contemporary science. Indeed, anyone who caught his lecture at Seacon '79, entitled 'Far Out Propulsion: Concepts of Interstellar Travel', will know just how bizarre the physics of Robert L Forward can be.

Whilst I do not doubt that, in his element, Forward is a first class writer, when it comes to writing fiction he knows little or nothing about the art. In the construction of his story and the creation of his characters, he shows an almost complete lack of imagination. This is best illustrated by reference to his structuring of Cheela history, a specific section of which is a direct transcription of the Christ mythos, right down to such fine details as the Cheela equivalent of Jesus throwing the profiteers out of the temple. He also assumes that an advanced civilisation will continue to advance socially, spiritually and scientifically ad infinitum, but the traumas that we are currently enduring would tend to point to the opposite.

So, as a piece of fiction, the book falls flat on its face. You might think that when it comes to dealing with subjects in his home territory, the physics and the technical background to the novel, he would excel, but even this aspect of the book fails to gel into a convincing whole. Unlike Benford, who skillfully weaves his science into the fabric of the story, or Clarke, who sweeps the reader along on a wave of enthusiasm, even passion, for his chosen discipline, the science in *Dragon's Egg* is served in indigestible lumps with no attempt whatsoever to integrate it into the fabric of the story. Science can only ever be used as a strong supporting element to the construction and de-tailing of a novel and can never be used, as Forward has here, as a substitute for good plot and depth of characterisation. Quite what convinces publishers that good writers of science, such as Forward, and more recently Sagan, automatically qualify as good writers of SF is beyond me. Even more beyond me is the fact that Forward, mainly on the strength of this novel, was nominated for this year's John W Campbell Award for the best new writer; but, given some of the past winners of that award, perhaps I shouldn't be so surprised.

Book Reviews

In short, *Dragon's Egg* represents a fabulous opportunity for some really inventive writing that has been totally and completely missed. Perhaps a more competent writer could have brought it off -- but that is something you and I will never know.

Roger Zelazny -- ROADMARKS (Orbit, 189pp, £1.50)

Reviewed by Martyn Taylor

Somewhere just off the beaten track is a Road that traverses Time. Only those with the knack of discovering it may travel the Road, but those with the knack tend to be interesting types -- Red Dorakeen, for instance, is, when we meet him, running guns to the Greeks at Marathon! Road history is not always historical history, and both are subject to change. Shortly after we arrive, an attempt is made on Red's life. It seems that a former business partner, Chadwick, has declared a 'black decade' against him, which means that he has ten attempts on Red's life without official interference. To this end, Chadwick employs an assortment of exotic killers, ranging from a kung-fu monk to an alien killing machine, but Red is light on his feet, by no means averse to shedding blood in the cause of not having his own shed, and anyway everything is not what it seems. In *Roadmarks* almost nothing whatsoever is what it seems. Red has help in the form of a supercomputer disguised as a book, Baudelaire's *Fleur du Mal* (and here I voice one discontent: throughout *Roadmarks* the book is called 'Flowers', yet it is universally known by its French, its only, title, and all the quotations from it are in French -- is it assumed that readers of *Roadmarks* are unaware of Baudelaire, or that they are incapable of understanding the quotations?). Red is also being pursued, albeit with better intentions, by his prescient former lover, Leila, and his (off-Road) son, Randy, who have the help of his previous computer book, Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*. Eventually all is resolved in a denouement of a complexity that cannot really be hinted at without giving away the whole plot.

Zelazny writes with a simplicity that never approaches coarseness while attaining a deceptive lucidity. The story is arranged into fragments, brief glimpses of the various strands of the plot with only chronology to impose a pattern. The overwhelming impression created in me was that of the pieces of a jigsaw thrown up into the air, flickering before my eyes before falling back to rest in the form of a perfect picture. That picture is only a sketch, a line drawing hinting at more than is contained within the words used. Zelazny casts ideas about with profligacy, letting them stand in place in the plot and permitting them to fulfill a function -- he, at least, seems prepared to allow that his readers may have imaginations of their own that they can use if pointed in the right direction, rather than needing to be led by a ring through the nose. The resulting book is a difficult one, intriguing and stimulating without the least hint of patronisation by the author, and it is well worth the effort to penetrate its mysteries.

Ian Watson --DEATHHUNTER (Gollancz, 173pp, £6.95)

Reviewed by Nick Lowe

Of Ian Watson's nine published novels, four have (as I write) yet to appear in paperback on either side of the Atlantic. I won't say that this is simply disgraceful, but it does mean that much of the extraordinary Watson corpus is still beyond the reach of most SF readers, and it's thus worth explaining that the post-*Miracle Visitors* Watson is rather different from the earlier. *Miracle Visitors* comes over as something of a culmination: the definitive essay on Watson's recurrent theme of how heightened or altered consciousness can expand our perceptions of reality right now, and give immediate access to

alien worlds without need for clumsy, expensive technological aids like space-ships. It's a novel on which opinion divides sharply, of course, and all I want to suggest here is that it is in a way the climax of Watson's earlier writing (whether or not one believes it to be one of the most important SF novels of the past half century -- I do, as a matter of fact). It's surely significant that his next three novels were all tales of space travel and alien planets, a theme hitherto conscientiously avoided except in some short fiction; and although the interplanetary 'trilogy' of *God's World*, *The Gardens of Delight* and the Michael Bishop collaboration *Under Heaven's Bridge* continue to address the theme of perceived reality through the medium of dramatised thought-experiment, they're different in two essential ways. First of all, they're moving away from immediately relevant and applicable suggestions for redirecting consciousness, like travelling to other worlds through meditation or building your own UFO experience, into more general metaphysical speculations about other ways of perceiving. Each novel takes a world that is not merely alien but fundamentally unintelligible until a protagonist attempts to perceive the natives' own view of reality, and goes on to explore it from within. But, secondly, perhaps more fascinating is that in two and arguably in all three of these novels, that change in perception involves actual death.

Death is what *Deathhunter* is all about. We're back on Earth now, in a 21st century America that's utopianised itself by cultivating a nice positive attitude to death under the inspiration of its laureate and social guru, a truly awful poet called Norman Harper. Harper is mercifully assassinated in the opening scene (which doesn't prevent Watson from assailing the whimpering reader with many more gleeful quotations from Harper's appalling scribbles) by the fanatical Nathan Weinberger, who claims to be able to (a) see Death carrying off souls, which according to official dogma don't exist; (b) isolate a pheromone emitted by the dying which attracts the rapacious Death in the first place; and (c) have designed and built a trap to cage Death itself. Our hero, one Jim Todhunter (yes), is persuaded by Weinberger's mad sincerity; together, they trap Death, and in an astral trance pursue it back into the bizarre metaphysical realm of the beyond. At this point, not surprisingly, the novel positively flames into life after a rather plodding set-up; and to reveal any more of the bizarre plot would undermine an essential virtue of all Watson novels from *Alien Embassy* onwards, which is the remarkable hooking power of a plot summary of the first hundred pages. But perhaps I ought to warn you that the visionary sequence is cut off all too soon by the advent of a scripted-in person from Porlock, and that the remainder of the novel, including a second excursion through death's door never quite recaptures the impact of the first tour of the beyond.

It's easier to judge *Deathhunter* by its own standards, as a Watson novel, than it is to gauge its success in more general terms. By now, I think, most readers will have made up their minds whether they like Watson or not, and *Deathhunter* isn't likely to revise any opinions. For the sympathetic, there's the familiar thrill of being blasted across the universe on a rocker-ride of ideas, an irresistible voyage of discovery through the phenomenal and beyond. It's to Watson's credit that at least half his novels really do satisfy the questing spirit they awaken. On the other hand, there's no sign of the author modifying any of the features of his writing that tend to irritate or alienate some readers. The characters are pretty skeletal, their personalities almost entirely intellectualised, and there's small chance of involvement with them if the ideas fail to grab. They think too much alike -- Todhunter acquiesces far too readily, in purely psychological terms, with Weinberger's daft ideas, and the two become increasingly interchangeable as the novel progresses. Of course, a Watson novel isn't a drama of character: he evidently feels that to involve the reader through anything but the intellectual quest is an evasion of the speculative writer's responsibility, a courageous view that obviously

doesn't appeal to all his readers. It's certainly dangerous when the chain of deduction itself is rather sloppy and dubious, as it is in *Deathhunter*, but that's a matter to which I'll return in a moment. And, as before, the love-it-or-hate-it Watsonian metaphor is still at large, from the very second page of this book: "Jim's sand dune, though, was speckled with fire at the throat". Or how about: "It was a mousetrap, thought Jim, with Weinberger soon to be laid out as the bait, synthetically scented with the gorgonzola of death". I think it's fair to say that if that last made you grin, you'll generally enjoy Watson, and if you grimaced he'll drive you potty. And then, of course, there's the wordplay: I checked in the phone book and there are apparently a couple of Todhunters in King's Lynn, but even so it's an exasperatingly contrived name for the protagonist of such a tale.

These are small, if potentially off-turning, peccadilloes: they're part of the way Watson writes, and the reader by now either tolerates them or doesn't. The question to ask of a Watson novel if you're to assess it in its own terms is: is it a rewarding and scientifically credible essay in speculation? Well, on the whole, no. There are worrying gaps in the scientific reasoning, such as the failure to address the question of souls and survival in any scientific terms, and the curiously vague death-pheromone, which is supposed to be an actual and isolable chemical substance although we are told nothing of its make-up, the method of its secretion, or the mechanism through which it attracts an entity on another plane of reality. The most interesting bit of speculation is the social: imagine a society with no death neurosis! But this too lacks much of the conviction it needs; it's difficult to build up from Harper's doggerel platitudes any idea of how his society can face death with such equanimity, let alone how such a diabolically Vogonic bard could ever have become so influential and revered. There's always seemed something a little glib about Watson's social extrapolation, even the elegantly-depicted soft-tech utopia of *Alien Embassy*. I could never really understand how the cosmological discovery of *The Jonah Kit* could have such shattering cultural repercussions, and I have to confess a personal distrust of any suggestion that a single idea can radically transform society, at least for the better. But I leave it to Watson's political opponents to charge him with woolly nouveau gauche naive revolutionary utopianism; it is, after all, only a thought-experiment.

For these reasons, I don't think that *Deathhunter* is absolutely tip-top Watson, not by the rather strenuous standards of his speculative ambitions. On the other hand, it is terrific SF, and one of the outstanding novels of a rather duff year for the genre, despite its occasional irritations and imperfections and a last chapter twist that will satisfy nobody. Because the visionary flights are restricted to two all-too-brief sequences, and there's some rather silly stuff in the second anyway, much of the book seems pale by contrast, and (like the novels of David Lindsay's middle years) may seem disappointing in comparison with such more extended metaphysical odysseys like that of *Miracle Visitors* and of that most Arcturan of Watson novels, *The Gardens of Delight*. But it's still an engaging, often intoxicating and occasionally breathtaking novel of ideas; and I for one feel that if we continue to undervalue the novel of ideas we're liable to emasculate the genre's major creative power. Only Ian Watson and the recently quiet Barry Bayley can consistently claim to be getting to imaginative grips with fundamental problems of science, its limits, and what lies beyond. If *Deathhunter* doesn't quite come off as a speculative essay, it's perhaps because death is a pretty big theme with which to wrestle.

One final worry, however: I don't see how the final twist can be compatible with pages 153-154. I hope I'm missing something.

Poul Anderson -- THE AVATAR (Sphere, 404pp, £1.95)

Reviewed by John Hobson

Poul Anderson is the Kilgore Trout of reality, a man with one of the longest and least distinguished bibliographies in SF. *The Avatar* appears to be his attempt to redress the balance in favour of 'literature', but his concept of good writing is to have the characters engage in a 400 page gang-bang at the expense of plot, style and interest.

An avatar is a Hindu deity incarnated on Earth to defeat evil, which in Anderson's world is spread by politicians wicked enough to spend money on welfare and social schemes rather than tossing messages in bottles out into space. But mankind has found a 'T machine' at the edge of the solar system which enables him to jump to a different part of the universe, where he has colonised Demeter, a habitable planet. The machine has been left by the 'Others', and although an expedition is sent out to explore the scope of its power, upon their return the explorers are incarcerated in a space station by Earth's government, which fears that its welfare programme will be destroyed by the fact that man has discovered another race. On Demeter, however, Dan Boderson, the all-American macho male, organises the expedition's rescue (with machine guns -- in a space station?), and is then forced to take them on an extended tour of the galaxy until they meet one of the 'Others' (who turn out to be blue-eyed blondes) and, discovering that one of them is an avatar, return it to Earth to save mankind from socialism. It is a plot that would leak badly after fifty pages, and Anderson's padding, consisting of a libertarian sermon and endless debates about adultery, scuttles it long before the end. The theme of god as an astronaut is so puerile and redundant that it comes as a surprise to learn that this book only dates from 1978.

The trouble with proper religions is that they impose restrictions upon the faithful, and thus on the 'freedom' which Anderson espouses at every turn but never defines. But in fact Anderson's much-vaunted 'freedom' is nothing more than selfishness; hence his championing of adultery and his desire for a god who will not visit retribution upon him for it at some later date. This flaccid moralising is carried on through the obvious auctorial mouthpiece, Dan Boderson, a hard talkin', hard fightin', hard screwin' rich guy who sets himself up as the unelected power on Demeter and, like Nixon, knows what the people really want. He castigates Keynesian economics and social democracy, but defends telephone tapping, trained gangs of thugs to rough up the opposition, and the acquisition and retention of wealth: "...suppose that money was divided equally among the (poor). What sum would each person get?" (p.53). Brought up to judge people by the size of their bank accounts, Anderson cannot conceive of a society which is not built around greed; his hero has money and therefore power, which he abuses by overturning a democratically elected government's decisions. Does Anderson really understand what he is preaching? Probably not; but then only in a democratic society could such attitudes ever be permitted open expression.

Boderson nevertheless has some substance, but the other characters are shadows, and with Hollywood accents to boot -- an Irish girl actually speaks of "me bucko" and "sassenachs". Since the book is thus chronically short on character development, not to mention action, the gaps are mostly filled with a monologue on the rights and wrongs of adultery, which Anderson favours only to undermine his liberality by denouncing abortion as murder and never once describing the sexual act: why the reticence? Doubtless because love has nothing to do with it; the only emotion Anderson seems capable of expressing is hate towards his enemies.

Even the most credulous Anderson fan will have trouble ploughing through this

stodgy and unexciting tale, which is bereft of any wisdom or insight and is a pathetic testament to the impoverished state of American SF.

Poul Anderson -- THE HIGH CRUSADE (Corgi, 144pp, 95p)

Reviewed by Ray Owen

Any book which is favourably reviewed in *The Sunday Express Magazine* must be worth reading, if only to see what sort of facile judgement they have made this time.

The High Crusade is reasonably accurately described on the front cover as "The bizarre outer-space odyssey of a mediaeval English village transported to an alien world". If compared to another Anderson adventure novel (*Satan's World*, for example) it is found to be both more entertaining and a considerably more mature piece of writing, even though it is a decade older. The characters could be seen as stereotypes -- cunning but noble knight, sturdy yeomanry, 'warriors for the working day' straight from *Henry V*, righteous monks -- but I think this can be allowed, for the story is recorded in the form of a mediaeval chronicle, where characters were habitually painted in bright, simple colours.

However, this format leads Anderson into a major trap: Hollywood Mediaeval English. A small amount in the opening lines of the chronicle would be fine, putting the reader in a suitable mood for the style of narration, but Anderson keeps trying it again and again until it becomes irksome. This leads to some odd combinations of Middle English and Modern American, such as the following: "'Tis a chance we must take. Come worst to worst, I'm not altogether terrified of another fight. See you not, our only chance is to act with boldness.'" At one point he decides to explain what a 'trebuchet' is -- it is clearly a dictionary definition, and far longer in the telling than it would have been to say 'catapult' in the first place. To be truly authentic, the language would have had to be Chaucerian verse or, more probably, Latin. This would have resulted in an interesting book, although it wouldn't have sold very well.

Some confusion about ancient language is perhaps forgiveable to a graduate in physics. What is completely beyond my understanding is how such an individual could fail to be aware of Newton's Third Law, 'Every action has an equal and opposite reaction', which makes Anderson's space-going longbowmen rather impractical. It is surely odd that after explaining away one of the most improbable plots I've ever encountered with a considerable amount of success, he should slip up on such simple points, like thinking a cube has four corners or that medium lancers could knock over a fully laden spacecraft.

But perhaps that is all part of the humour of the novel: a mediaeval reaction to everything that happens. How else could a bloody battle be so humourously described: "True, they possessed fire-beams, as well as force shields to stop those same fire-beams. But they had never thought to lay down caltraps." Occasionally, the humour comes from the incongruity of the crusaders' background and their new experiences; their reaction to a laser is to say, "'We've been trying out some of those hand-weapons. We burned down three houses, a pig, and a serf ere we learned how to control them.'"

I must admit that I enjoyed this novel a great deal. It is adventure as it should be: entertaining, well-constructed and intelligent. Although there are a few lines stolen from Robin Hood ("Yet Englishmen have ever fought best with their backs to the wall"), for the most part the book captures nicely the tone of the age: "Truly he was a peerless leader. I attribute it to the blood of King William the Conqueror, a bastard grandson of whom wed an illegitimate

daughter of that Earl Godfrey who was later outlawed for piracy, and so founded the noble de Tourneville house.'" Furthermore, the story demonstrates that SF can be humorous without being cynical.

So *The Sunday Express* was right for once. Perhaps it had something to do with Michael Moorcock's having written the article?

Terry Carr -- FANTASY ANNUAL III (Timescape, 291pp, \$2.95)

Reviewed by Mary Gentle

An anthology should have a theme: *Fantasy Annual III* represents work copyright 1979, and so ostensibly should have something to say about the state of fantasy in that year.

As a genre, fantasy encompasses many facets of the inexplicable. There's the horror story, in this case Stephen King finding something suitably nasty in 'The Crate'. Ghost stories are represented by Manly Wade Wellman and Russell Kirk: the former's 'Trill Coster's Burden', a variation on the sin-eater custom, and the latter's 'Fate's Purse', a standard tale of a dead miser's vengeance. Harlan Ellison -- extending the usual paragraph introduction to two and a half pages -- offers the usual Ellisonian apocalypse, a story of demons and radio broadcasters that read as if (as he claims) it was written in a single afternoon. John Brunner comes closest to 'pure' fantasy with a Traveller in Black story: Chaos becomes Order in an elemental world, and Brunner drily mocks the credulous. But the flavour of the story is little different from the original series, written over a decade ago. And, in fact, none of these stories have anything that mark them as having been written in the 1970s.

One use of fantasy is to encompass the paranormal, done here in Kevin McKay's 'Pie Row Joe', another to expound a moral -- Orson Scott Card's 'Eumenides in the Fourth-Floor Lavatory' is a gruesome little tale, full of me-generation psychology, in which a five-star sonofabitch is pursued by infant Furies, and repents only to find that isn't nearly enough. It would have been a better story if the immaturity showing through didn't indicate that the writer's material was in control of him, rather than vice versa. Like Walter Tevis's ambiguous fragment, 'Rent Control', it's full of USA Plastic People; perhaps this is the direction in which fantasy is moving.

Fantasy used as psychoanalysis, insight into character, surfaces in Michael Bishop's 'Collaborating', one of the less classifiable stories in the collection. It's an oddly believable account of what it might be like to be a mutant, two men with (from the neck down) one body. As well as being a study of possessive love at unusually close quarters, it can be read as exploring the split between mind, body and emotion.

Surprisingly (or not) for the late 1970s, these stories have mostly Establishment protagonists: male, white, American and middle class. Joanna Russ mirrors and distorts these conventions in 'The Extraordinary Voyages of Amelie Bertrand', a very funny pastiche of Jules Verne, in which the bourgeois French narrator listens to the stories of the entirely liberated Amelie, and finally follows her into other, not wholly real, dimensions. Verne would have enjoyed it, but he wouldn't have known why it was funny: that needs the perspective of the 1970s. Also very much of our time, Suzy McKee Charnas's 'The Ancient Mind At Work' is redeemed from banality partly by the conception of vampire-as-predator, but mainly by the portrayal of Katje de Groot. Charnas has done the almost impossible by making this reactionary white South African woman a sympathetic character, and doing it not by engaging any latent fascist sympathies in the reader but by showing how her past made her what she is, and how -- as with the vampire -- the world has moved on and left her behind.

The remaining two stories, perhaps the best in the book, are fantasies about fantasy or, in the larger sense, fiction as a whole, and should, therefore, provide clues to the position of fantasy in the 1970s.

Fritz Leiber's 'The Button Moulder' is a semi-autobiographical companion piece to *Our Lady of Darkness*, in which a writer of fantasy encounters explicable phenomena (reflections and illusions) on moving into a new San Francisco apartment, and is finally -- while trying to write an autobiography to break a writer's block -- ambushed by the inexplicable. The apparition that threatens to reduce him to sterile certainty may be real, or may be patched together out of the rags of his subconscious: the ambiguity is necessary. The writer, having survived his encounter with it, plunges back from solipsism to frenetic involvement with the world and an even more profuse output of stories. The Button Moulder, reducing all human beings to their lowest common denominators, is held at bay by the power of imaginative fiction.

Greg Bear has more to say about the power of fiction in 'The White Horse Child', a lyrical fable in which a young boy is seduced into developing his talent as a story-teller. Led on by a half-fabulous old couple and held back by a tract-toting great aunt, the boy becomes a focus for the old argument between art and the puritan work ethic; but it's a 'live' story, larger than its message (if there is one). Embedded as one of the stories within the story is that of the White Horse Child, at first sight a justification of fantasy but perhaps only a description of its effect on the reader. Part of the story must, as with Leiber's, be seen as a personal statement, as all fiction is; but both writers, belonging to different generations, use fantasy to illumine and make a pattern of the strangeness of the universe. Both 'The Button Moulder' and 'The White Horse Child' are firmly embedded in their time, but neither will ever look dated.

So what's the state of fantasy in 1979? The same as it ever was. "I never had a reason for telling a story," Greg Bear's old woman says to the boy, "and neither should you."

Samuel R Delany -- DISTANT STARS (Ace, 352pp large format, \$8.95)

Reviewed by John Hobson

Delany's work has become devalued by repetition, and it is becoming increasingly difficult to identify the freshness and originality which once marked him out. The contents of *Distant Stars* -- sturdily bound, printed on high quality paper, comprehensively illustrated and clearly aimed at the high-tech coffee-table market -- constitute no mere 'best of' anthology but range from as old as 'Empire Star', the pivotal story in his development, right up to 'Omegahelm', an extract from his forthcoming novel, yet all have a curiously dated feel to them: like paisley shirts, beads and incense, they belong to a bygone age as remote from the present as the so-called 'Golden Age' was from the sixties.

The first of the 'new' pieces in the collection is the introduction masquerading as an essay in which Delany reveals that he constantly revises his stories. Its tone is to suggest that this is something of shattering originality; but it isn't. Of greater interest is 'Omegahelm', included as a taster for his next novel, *Stars in my Pocket Like Grains of Sand*, the beginning of which reveals that his love of the English language remains as strong as ever:

"Bloody lace lazied on the bay.

Pink clouds filigreed the sky.

The great red sun, at the world's rim, worked its changes on the green sea below her, the coppery east beyond her, the marbled rocks she climbed on."

(p.265)

The homage to Elizabethan prose and the metaphorical imagery in this blank verse promise a literary excursion which fails to materialise as Delany abruptly abandons this approach in favour of a return to a predictably over-written style, leaving one wanting to know why he bothered with such an introduction. This would only be a quibble if it were not for the pedestrian qualities of the story, a lacklustre retelling of *Frankenstein* by the female dictator of half the universe who admits to a defecting prodigy that she once created a short-lived genetic freak for her own voyeuristic delight. To excuse it as an extract from a novel is possible, but it nevertheless shows how little development in Delany's style there has been over the past fifteen years; artistically, he seems to be trapped in amber.

The other new piece, 'Ruins', originally appeared in a fanzine. It is a run-of-the-mill gothic tale of a thief with a dental problem discovering a ruined church, treasure and a bewitching guardian who offers him the treasure in exchange for his soul; he escapes but seems destined to return. It is well written, but otherwise of little merit.

The remaining tales have all appeared elsewhere. By far the most important of them is 'Empire Star', which traces the development of Comet Joe, an archetypal teenage figure on a (space) journey, from an uncouth lout to a questioning, thinking adult. Ignoring the traditions of such tales, which call for continued action and 'growth' through violence, Delany instead subtly reveals the expansion of Comet Joe's mind by the speech he, and the others he meets, use. There is also an inconclusive ending, a rarity in mid-sixties SF: the story's jigsaw of events and occurrences allows for an almost infinite number of variations or endings to the tale. John Jude Palencar, one of the book's seven artists, provides the most effective set of illustrations, skillfully depicting various facets of the story, assembling them into circles to denote a completed section of it and then dividing and reassembling the pictures at the end to complement and indeed enhance it. A very worthwhile partnership.

'We, In Some Strange Power's Employ, Move On A Rigorous Line' is the most traditional story in the book (it has a beginning, a middle and an end), in which Delany transposes the concept of the noble savage fending off encroaching civilisation into the future, where the savages are Hell's Angels and the vanguard of progress electricity workers wanting to connect them to the grid. It's a truthful insight into the inevitability of change, conflict and the inability of the new conquerors to comprehend why anyone would reject the benefits of modern living. It is by far the most satisfying story in the book, the one piece that does not belie its age.

Time has been less generous to the Nebula winning 'Time Considered As A Helix Of Semi-Precious Stones', an overtly arty self-conscious piece with an overabundance of verbal pyrotechnics and a total lack of structure and plot. The predictable non-ending, copied so many times since, is as irritating as the trick endings of the 'Golden Age'. 'Prismatic', a Brothers Grimm type fairy tale, and 'Corona', a psionic tale, are worthy but unoriginal.

Distant Stars is an interesting but not essential anthology; age has not been altogether kind to yesterday's enfant terrible.

Philip K Dick -- THE GOLDEN MAN (Magnum, 338pp, £1.50)

Reviewed by David Penn

Almost no Dick novel so far has been fully successful, yet it is patently obvious that he is capable of work of real genius: he can create real characters, he can create atmosphere, he has a brilliant and evocative range of images, he

can write prose which is vivid and effective, he has a powerful vision of life. But he never seems to be able to get it all together, and when you're talking about a writer of such talent working within a genre so desperately in need of it, the situation begins to look more and more gloomy.

When he does succeed in producing something well-made, it's in the best of his stories. One or two of those in *The Preserving Machine* are some of the best explorations of an image you could hope to read; the same is true of some of those in *The Golden Man*, an edition of 'quality' Dick stories hard to find anywhere else.

'The Last of the Masters', for example, is a vision of the mechanistic, centralised nature of Western societies. The symbol of this is a robot, Bors, designed as an administrating machine and built during our own age of technology which has survived into a time when people rule themselves: it governs a tiny pocket of traditional society, running factories, building arms and commanding a hierarchy. Built into it is a drive to serve man by leading him, and it is struggling to preserve what it sees as civilisation amongst what it sees as barbarism and chaos. But at the same time it is deteriorating: it can no longer walk, only one of its arms functions correctly, and the coils that comprise its memory (containing the information necessary to construct an industrial state) are burning out. It is a frightening contraption with enough humanity to make it into a character capable of inspiring sympathy. We recognise that it is struggling heroically to do what it thinks is right, and is not some Frankenstein creation insanely perpetuating a tyrannical system, although there is something of an obsessive plunge-to-destruction about it. Dick subtly builds this strange figure with little episodes and quiet references, having the robot when we first meet it come awake in a hospital bed, supported and nursed by its human aides. When it is placed on two chairs to conduct an interrogation, the girl interrogee kicks away one of them and it sprawls helplessly on the floor crying for help. Dick describes in lingering detail, with a detachment that reinforces the image, the final collapse of Bors when an agent of the Anarchist League attacks it:

"The robot shuddered. Its machinery thrashed. It half-rose from its chair, then swayed and toppled. It crashed full-length on the floor, parts and gears rolling in all directions."

There is action in the story, as the Anarchists discover the existence of the robot's surviving industrial state and send agents in to destroy it. There are other standard thriller devices: a helpless girl, an ambush, and unexpected turns to keep the pressure up. But none of it, in this case, detracts from Dick's effective opposition of symbols, centering on the supernatural figure of Bors, almost akin to a Shakespearian tragedy.

There are other stories in the collection as good as this, and some of them are even more precisely constructed, lacking any superfluous action. 'The Golden Man', 'King of the Elves', 'Return Match', 'The Mold of Yancy', 'Not By Its Cover', 'Sales Pitch', 'Small Town' and 'Precious Artifact' -- all these are far superior to anything done by most other writers of science fiction.

But, appallingly if not quite unexpectedly, there are many stories in the book which were written during the same periods as the good ones but which are little more than prose TV dramas, their content of Dick mythos notwithstanding. The development of their plots hinges on continual twists, revelations, detective work, stock characters and fast pacing. There is none of the concentration of the other pieces, of the clarity and precision that characterises, for example, 'The Golden Man', or the brilliantly effective representations in 'The Last of the Masters', or any of the depth the latter has with or without its concession to action.

Probably the worst example of hackwork in the collection is 'The Unreconstructed M'. In this story, a police officer investigates a murder which, unbeknownst to him, has been committed by a machine that can leave false clues at the scene of its crime to implicate an innocent party. Various other characters are introduced, and as the story progresses we discover that they are all connected to each other by some strange set of coincidences. For example, the policeman discovers that his wife has become the lover of the man who built the assassination machine. Many want this machine for their own ends, and all vie desperately for it. Behind this made-over episode of *The Streets of San Francisco* seems to be the idea that our technological society is tremendously vulnerable to fakery. But what's the point of all the fast scene-changing and knotty revelations? It's hard to see how they throw any light on the theme -- in fact, all such machinations only conspire to obscure and bury it. It seems obvious that this story was written for a market, and its rapid flights of actions were simply included for their escapist value.

In stories like 'The Unreconstructed M', Dick is first and foremost a market writer, a churner-out of science fiction adventures, and an explorer of theme only second. His vision of the world becomes a sort of prop for a way-out action-packed potboiler, and whenever that happens his brilliance vanishes. In the stories I listed earlier his overriding concern is to communicate a vision or an image, but in this and other stories in this collection -- 'The Little Black Box', 'The War with the Fnools' and 'A Game of Unchance' -- he is trying purely and simply to write something that will grab someone's attention. If he wrote so poorly in only a few short stories and consistently took care to avoid cheap devices in other work, the point would hardly be worth making; but in fact nine out of ten of his novels lack the model construction of his ideal style, and so do far too many of the stories in this and other collections. He may be improving, as *A Scanner Darkly* and perhaps *Valis* and *The Divine Invasion* suggest, but if he doesn't then his inconsistency and weakness for crowd-pleasing will leave him with the reputation that most of his previous work credits him with -- that of a very uneven and uncared science fiction writer capable of occasional flashes of brilliance. And, in view of those flashes of brilliance, some of which are visible in the best stories in *The Golden Man*, it's obvious that Dick owes himself more than that.

Byron Preiss, William Service & William Stout -- DINOSAURS (Bantam, 160pp large format, \$12.95)

Reviewed by Joseph Nicholas

Stout is the illustrator, Service the 'narrator' and Preiss the editor and book packager responsible for putting together this 'picture book for adults' -- something that looks like just another exercise in coffee table decoration but whose standard belies its initial appearance. Even so, it has to be admitted that it's only one small step above being an introduction to its subject: although Peter Dodson, a paleontologist at the University of Pennsylvania, contributes a glossary of technical terms and checked the text for scientific accuracy, Service's 'narration' consists of a series of fictionalised episodes in the daily lives of dinosaurs, divided up into such chapters as 'Childhood', 'Breakfast at Daybreak', 'The Duel', 'Friends', 'The Sea and the Storm' and the astonishingly coy 'Bathroom Habits' (!) and written in a rather irritating 'you are there' present tense which sacrifices comprehensiveness for immediacy. This can be excused, however, on the grounds that the book is intended to cast light on the creatures by allowing us to appreciate them as once-living beings rather than dry fossils in museums, and this it manages very well indeed:

"Under the tall charred trunks of cypresses, a tangled mat of low shrubs and sedge stretched from the river down to the bay. Small herbivores browsed softly. Young ankylosaurs, not yet fully armored (sic), worked

on punk logs for the grubs and termites within them. A single hadrosaur swam the river and eased quietly up the bank. She stood upright a long moment, looking around and listening, her nose searching every wrinkle of air. She dropped down to sample what her eyes had already told her was good, then rose up again to give out a series of mellow honks which radiated to the horizon. The signal immediately brought two more to the river and a number down from hill and forest. She stopped honking. Faint answers came from far away. She honked back..." (from 'The Marsh')

A little simplistic, perhaps, but still effective. What is most effective about this book, however, and where it really scores, is its artwork: instead of bare bones and stagily posed 'reconstructions', Stout gives us a series of illustrations of the creatures in all their fleshy, mottled, lumpy and ungainly glory, many of them in full colour -- and quite remarkable paintings they are too; I particularly admire the double page spread depicting a crocodilian phobosuchus grappling with the herbivorous kritosaurus on the banks of a river, a picture full of action and excitement. Some of the black and white illustrations, on the other hand, are less successful: for example, that of a riojasaurus taking a crap (in 'Bathroom Habits') gives it an expression of straining concentration so lugubrious that I nearly fell out of my chair with laughter. But, overall, I would recommend the book -- not least because a portion of its proceeds will be donated to conservation organisations fighting to preserve modern-day species from extinction.

David Gerrold -- *DEATHBEAST* (Robert Hale, 255pp, £6.25)

Reviewed by John Hobson

In 1973, Adrian Desmond demolished one hundred years of cosy paleontological orthodoxy when he wrote *The Hot-Blooded Dinosaurs* and proved that the Victorian notion of them as lumbering brainless reptiles was a product of mammalian wish-fulfillment. We could not bring ourselves to admit that dinosaurs had at one stage in prehistory competed so successfully with mammals that the only niche in which our ancestors could find refuge was as mice, and that it was only their sudden extinction which had allowed the mice to come out into the sun.

David Gerrold has obviously read Desmond's book, and also Brian Aldiss's short story 'Poor Little Warrior'; as a result, *Deathbeast* is a story of hunters going back to the Cretaceous to zap dinosaurs with what appear to be microwave ovens, so that the luckless reptiles are cooked inside out. Lifting large chunks of Desmond's book, in particular his description of the pteranodon, Gerrold misunderstands his theme to the extent that his novel resembles a guided tour of an abattoir. Unfortunately, he never bothered to read a book on prehistoric botany, and as a result the landscape through which the eponymous creature -- a tyrannosaurus who begins to hunt the hunters -- stalks is barren and lifeless. He did little proofreading, either, as at one point he manages to claim that man has been on the Earth for sixty million years; try telling that to the Leakeys.

Gerrold's only claim to fame is as the script writer of the *Star Trek* episode 'The Trouble with Tribbles', and the book in fact reads rather like a film script (one of Ray Harryhausen's, to be exact). It is undemanding and easily digested fare, but I would rather track down Desmond's book or, better still, for a real journey into the past, visit the Natural History Museum's exhibition inspired by it.



PREJUDICING THE READER'S RESPONSE

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I found *Vector* 104 to be one of the poorer issues to have been produced lately, probably because it was full of articles about books I have never read. I am always wary about such articles, since they can prejudice the reader's response to books he might otherwise have reacted to differently. For example, I found it very difficult to be critically objective about *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, since it was a work which I had heard so much about before I got round to reading it. The current Penguin paperback edition even contains an introductory essay, explaining what the reader should gain from the novel. I do not, personally, believe that there is any such thing as the 'right way' to read a book. A book may mean different things to different readers, but that need not mean that one of the readers has read the book wrongly. He may merely have read it differently, extracting different, equally legitimate, points from the same text.

The 'Reassessments' feature could prove to be extremely interesting. Book reviews are always coloured by the political and literary climate in which they were written and it would be interesting to see how the new reviews, written in the harsh, cynical 1980s will compare with reviews of the same books which were written in the more euphoric days of the 1960s and early 70s. It will also be rewarding, if Reassessments becomes a regular feature, to see how the fans of the 1990s will write about authors such as Ballard, Priest, Dick and Wolfe who are the recipients of such praise today.

While reading Joe Nicholas's review of Christopher Priest's *The Affirmation*, it struck me that this obviously important novel will be extremely unlikely to win the BSFA Award. This is not because of the quality of the novel itself, but because of the structure of the award. Since *The Affirmation* is at present only available in hardback, very few BSFA members will be able to afford it and, since Chris Priest is not that well known outside of science fiction, many libraries will not stock the novel. Because of this, it will have far less chance of winning than novels which are available more quickly in paperback. When the paperback edition is finally issued, the book will no longer be eligible for the award. Surely this unfortunate situation could be remedied by changing the scope of the novel award to cover only works published for the first time in paperback in Britain during the year. Although the award might be given to works published some time before, the poll would be fairer, since most BSFA members will read more paperback novels than hardcover ones in the course of a year. With a little luck, the paperback edition of *The Affirmation* will be out in time for the final ballot next year, giving this novel a proper opportunity to win the award.

Except, Andrew, that The Affirmation might never get into paperback at all, as Paul Kincaid makes depressingly clear in his guest editorial. Aside from that, I'm against rule changes that are merely to help worthy novels win awards despite being published at the 'wrong' time of the year -- and what you suggest is essentially that. Personally, I would be highly delighted if The Affirmation were to win the BoSFA; Chris is a friend, the novel (even though I'm only halfway through it at the moment) is extremely good -- and it would be one in the eye for the paperback publishers! I shall, of course, be voting for it myself.

SCIENCE IN SF

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U S A

Kathy McCutcheon's article sounded dull (because of its title) but actually made a number of interesting points. It is useful to compare her description of the function of science in SF (it "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") with some of James Blish's strictures on the same: "it is the duty of the conscientious science fiction writer not to falsify what he believes to be known fact." This might seem to be in total opposition to McCutcheon's views. But then Blish writes: "It is an even more important function for him to suggest new paradigms, by suggesting to the reader, over and over again, the X, Y and Z are possible." Blish uses Thomas S Kuhn's definition of paradigms in *The Nature of Scientific Revolutions* -- "universally recognised scientific achievements that, for a time, provide model problems and solutions to a community of practitioners." I think, however, that Blish would require that the SF writer have more responsibility to fact than the fantasist, such as Kafka. Blish concluded in his essay that the "most important scientific content in modern science fiction are the impossibilities", but his conclusion is based on what these impossibilities suggest, and implies a certain responsibility. McCutcheon never discusses the distinction between deliberate invention (with a specific purpose in mind) and the careless abuse of science. This is to what Blish objects -- and quite rightly, I think.

While we're on the subject of James Blish: David Penn is dead wrong about 'Common Time'. Penn writes "the best way to handle a grand theme is not to illustrate it wholesale, and then glory in one's own illustration." I doubt whether this statement is true, and doubt further if it applies to 'Common Time'. "We are told in detail (my emphasis) what it is like for an astronaut's subjective time sense to be mucked about" -- but this is exactly what makes the story so intense. No one else in science fiction has shown so exactly how this might affect a man. "Very little happens." Was Penn hoping for a crew of boarding space pirates, perhaps? "There are no characters to speak of..." Of course not; this is a short story, not a novel. One picks a very limited scope for a true short story. None of Borges's short stories have any characters either. (However, Blish has written another story, a novelette, with a theme very similar to that of 'Common Time', which might please David Penn more, because it is a story of character. It's called 'Darkside Crossing' -- Galaxy, December 1970. This is one of Blish's best stories, but it has never been reprinted except in a Best From Galaxy volume. Again, there is a journey across space, and a strange change in the viewpoint character, but we are given much more development of the character's needs and motives before this change. And there is a weird babble of alien voices at the story's end. Very dark and brooding, overall.)

I get the impression that what David Penn was objecting to in 'Common Time' was that "We are told in detail (my emphasis, this time) what..." In other words, his objection is not so much to the 'in detail' as to the 'told' -- and 'telling' is not the same as 'showing', as you should know, Cy; it's wicked of you to confuse the two.

Cy had also sent a letter on Vector 103, which arrived too late to use last time. It was mostly about Doris Lessing, about whom we have plenty this issue in any case.

IN RESPONSE

Mary Gentle
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I'm not really trying to engender a feud either, but I'm afraid Jon Wallace is wrong when he says it isn't possible to tell whether an author's work grows organically from his previous works, or is produced for commercial reasons. Regarding Eddison, he in the letter of introduction to *The Mezentian Gate* says, "The trilogy will, as I now foresee, turn to a tetralogy; and the tetralogy probably then (as an oak puts on girth and height with the years) lead to further growth." Eddison didn't live to complete the sequence, but it's as good a definition of organic growth as I can think of; and this a good many years before *LOTR* made fantasy a truly commercial proposition. As regards Donaldson, one volume of a putative three isn't perhaps enough to form a judgement on. I like Mr Wallace's suggestion that we shouldn't let good writing blind us to commerce -- personally I don't care why writing's good, only why it's bad!

The other Mr Wallace -- Alexander Doniphan -- is of course right to pick holes in my definition of mainstream fiction. What I intended to say was that mainstream is fiction concerned with exhaustive psychological explorations of character, set in a society operating during the author's lifetime. The modern novel, in fact. (The term 'mainstream' wouldn't be used in that field, as definition proceeds by exclusion -- what isn't SF, thriller, historical, etc. must be 'literature'.) 'Character and society' is far too quick a definition, yes. It comes of not reading what was written.

Kathy McCutcheon's excellent article should, temporarily at least, put a stop to the search for a definition of SF; and it will be interesting to see how SF writers like being defined as a sub-set of fantasists. But it's only necessary to study her definition of fantasy to see that all literature can be included in it -- fiction being concerned with events (and people) that couldn't exist in 'the world as we know it', because fiction never has any objective reality. SF is a sub-set of untruth. The question isn't whether SF has 'a legitimate place in Western literature', but whether Western literature has a legitimate place in reality. If it has, 'definitions' are of use only as object labels, and not as value statements. It helps to be able to point to a book and say "This is SF, or fantasy, or mainstream," but that designation shouldn't prejudge the individual work. Any book that can be completely described by its label is a second-rate book.

** Which, of course, is why definitions had no place in my search for a critical standard a few issues ago. Personally, I am pretty sure that literature has a place in reality. In one sense, a novel is full of lies, since the people and events described have no physical existence: note I do not say 'real' existence. In another sense a novel has itself a physical existence; you can pick it up and throw it at the cat. And in yet another sense, a novel may contain moral or ethical or metaphysical or philosophical or emotional truth (this is not an exhaustive list) and thus have an abstract 'reality'. Go and read *The Affirmation* (yes, that novel again!); it's all in there.

Unlike Mary, I am much more interested in why a piece of writing is good than why it is bad. Bad writing has only a few causes, and it's just a matter of discovering which ones and how much. Good writing is not just writing which isn't bad, since there is quite a lot of indifferent writing about. The reasons why something is good writing -- now there's a big subject...

THE CONTINUING SAGA...

Garry Kilworth
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Paul Kincaid replied to my letter with the rapidity of a wounded iconoclast but I think he is misinterpreting my misinterpretation. It would appear that, to a certain extent, we agree. (I know, Paul, I'm just as surprised as you are.) My argument remains, that within science fiction many people still regard SF as a second class literature and speak of authors who have transcended SF. Hence, as I implied in my letter, there is a defensiveness that operates within, which seeks to exalt that which is not SF but which can be claimed for its own. For instance, an SF author who writes a successful mainstream (I hate that word) novel. I too am pleased when an SF author proves to the national press that she or he can write something which they (the national critics, bigots or whatever) regard as a valuable contribution to literature, but I personally would not consider the 'mainstream' novel as being superior to the author's SF novels simply because it was not SF. I'm not sure I even agree with the statement: "All good SF hovers on the verge of being something else." Some good SF does. (Some bad SF does.) By 'something else' Brian Aldiss presumably means another type of novel, original and literary. However, some good SF is simply original and literary science fiction. (This argument, of course, depends on the much discussed definition of SF.) I was not seeking to destroy your household gods, Paul, simply putting forward a point of view, which to a certain extent coincides with your own.

Personal note: I once asked Chris Priest what I should do about a scathing review. He advised, "Try not to retaliate." The trouble is, the critic never knows when one is remaining aloof. Therefore I should like to finish by saying I read the review in Paperback Inferno of *Split Second* and I am remaining aloof.

** Right! That's it! No more arguments between Garry and Paul in *Vector* while I'm editor! (The two have never actually met each other, and it will intrigue them to know that they were standing within a few feet of each other at the recent Novacon 11, with me standing between them. At the time I didn't know that they didn't know each other; I thought they might be remaining aloof...)

LITERATURE'S JUSTIFICATION

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The question "Why does it (literature) need justification?" which Mary Gentle asks in connexion with my 'SF and Reality' article is a sort of rhetorical, self-answering question, because the assumption implicit in it is that all literature is 'a good thing'. But is it? I think not, for reasons too obvious to state. (Tolstoy's views, however, are very interesting on the subject.) I therefore see more 'justification' for some kinds of writing than for others.

"Saying literature has to be useful and practical is only the Puritan work ethic again," says Mary, but she goes on to say that it should give pleasure. It is 'useful' in that sense. To omit 'enlightenment' from her list of things that the 'ideal novel' would provide must surely have been an oversight, and I doubt that there is any fundamental disagreement between us.

** I think you really need to state your "reasons too obvious too state". I always suspect arguments that have this type of statemnt in them, as it implies sloppy thinking, lazy thinking -- which may not be a justified implication. (I'd have liked to know what Tolstoy's views were, as well. I have no idea.)

COSMIC HUGOS!

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All aboard the dandelion seed for a look at Cosmos: I think Marcus Rowland is too harsh in his assessment of the series. Granted, the dandelion seed/spaceship/controls were godawful ideas, but some British TV science programmes aren't exactly blameless on this account either: e.g.

Magnus Pike's 'windmill effect' and 'Bellamy's Backyard Safari'. Cosmos contained some brilliant segments, e.g. the DNA and evolution sequences, and the historical reconstructions were a good idea well done. It was trying to be a serious programme and whilst it's not in the 'Ascent of Man' or 'Life on Earth' class I think that in time it will be highly regarded. Sagan is still the best scientific populariser in the written word.

Mention of the written word reminds me -- aren't the Hugo results for best novel depressing? How people can nominate and vote for such potboilers as *Ringworld Engineers* and *Beyond the Blue Event Horizon* whilst such original works as *The Shadow of the Torturer* and *Timescape* don't even get onto the final ballot is totally beyond me. Don't people think about what they read or are they too far gone to recognise crap when they see it? *The Snow Queen* and *Lord Valentine's Castle* were good reads at least (particularly the Silverberg) but they could hardly be called breath-takingly original. The Hugo Award continues to debase itself into something laughable.

HIDDEN MASTERPIECES

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Andrew Sutherland "looks 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." If no one buys it, and hence no one prints it, what the hell is he going to do with it? Pin it in a frame and say how his masterwork has been rejected by the cloth-headed literary bigots of the establishment? Joe Nicholas reserves the term 'literary masturbation' for published writers, but I think it is even more applicable to those hidden geniuses who write their brilliant stories solely for their own narcissism, no thought of the external, grubby world attached.

** What Andrew Sutherland really holds in contempt (if he will permit me to presume what he meant to say) are those authors who reject the difficult option, the story that will be hard to write and harder to sell -- but bloody good when it's finished --, in favour of the potboiling, easy to sell, trivial, commercial trash. I have no objection to trivial, commercial trash myself, so long as I do not have to read it and it doesn't come within a hundred miles of me. There are many authors who can write nothing else, and rely on it to pay the mortgage; I do not wish to deprive them of their livelihoods (since to do so would take the unemployment figures well over three million). But there are one or two authors who can write good stuff, and when they refuse to do so for base commercial reasons then I join Andrew Sutherland in looking at them with contempt. And maybe spitting a bit, for that matter.

CONCERNING JOSEPH NICHOLAS

David Shotton
The Warden's House
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Shrewsbury
Shropshire

I appear to be at odds with Joseph Nicholas, once again. I do not wish this to become a slow moving dialogue between us via the letter section of Vector; this is my last letter to you, on this particular subject anyway.

I cannot agree with his assertion (Vector 103) that his comments (Vector 101) can only be considered for the

stories and novels in his article; when you criticise an author's work it follows that you are directly driticising the taste and judgement of the fans who like it. The two are inseparable.

The 'trap' that I supposedly followed James Miller into is a very curious item indeed. Traps do not occur naturally, they have to be set, either consciously or unconsciously. The competent writer would surely remove any ambiguity from his work before sending it to print, thus removing the unconscious trap. On the other hand, there is the trap set by a writer to mislead and confuse the reader, for whatever reason; if this is the case then may I suggest he considers taking over the competition spot in Matrix.

I did ask in my first letter whether Nicholas liked the occasional 'nice easy read': well, now I know. God, what a trial it must be to be an intellectual. This would explain the apparently pretentious writing style, but not why he is so damned patronising.

I would also suggest that he checks up what his thalamus is actually for.

It isn't quite that easy to remove the 'unconscious trap'. A writer has his own set of unconscious assumptions, so he sees that it is 'obvious' what he means, whereas the reader may not. On the other hand, I agree totally with your implicit views of the writer who sets deliberate traps. It is at best underhand, and at worst dishonest and malicious.

Here is what looks to me very much like a last word on Joseph Nicholas.

Geogre Bondar
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Only two WAHFs to my credit and you expect me to write a loc! Okay, let's try what seems to be a popular theme at the moment: the infamous Joseph Nicholas.

Many dastardly bums have written, in envy, contumely at our noble chief critic, whose only aim is enlightenment and raising of standards.

More recently, several creeps (certainly his acolytes) have propounded specious praises of this low worm who seeks to villify his betters, thereby to bring them down to his degradation.

I propose a pusillanimous middle view.

Joe is a sensitive, well-meaning soul. I believe he honestly seeks self-gratification and simultaneously the gratification of all by improving the quality of SF. Doubtless he first tried this with small praises to up-and-coming writers not yet ossified in cranial processes. This patently does not work since such are, despite their protestations, after fame and fortune. The few with integrity are soon seduced from the true path by their first successes.

Thus Joe, in torment of futility, essayed (sorely against his nature) minor criticisms to goad them to their own betterment. The perversity of human nature spurned this painful generosity. Inevitably, as a man will wield a bigger axe when the woods reveals itself more obdurate, Joe must needs abandon subtlety to drive his meaning through their thick bonces.

Pity Joe! A gentle heart calloused into a hair-trigger machine gunner of invective; unable to see now, for instance, even that Spider Robinson is a good writer.

Spider writes good reviews and good stories. His characters are all good.

There is nothing bad in his stories. That is to say, anything that is bad and has more substance than moonlight on a sleepy pillow is revealed to have been good all along -- just misunderstood.

A cake that is sweet in its layering, in its icing, in all its parts sweet unto surfeit, is surely sweet. Therefore I say Spider Robinson is a good writer since he writes nowt but good.

Yecht!

!! -Speechless-

WE ALSO HEARD FROM....

Iain R Byers, who hopes that the BSFA will get around to appointing a lady editor of Vector one of these days. Any ladies care to volunteer?

Jeremy Crampton, who showed himself not to be one of the great apathetics, but still confused fans who believe in FIAWOL (look it up in the last Matrix) with the BSFA. The two are by no means synonymous, and quite a number of fans see the BSFA as irrelevant.

Paul Brazier, who dared me to print his letter -- which I tend to interpret as daring me not to print it. And of course, I can't turn down a dare... I will, however, paraphrase it. Essentially Paul considers that the writers of articles, reviews and letters do more to obfuscate (Paul thought that I might not know what that meant, but declined to explain) than to clarify matters. He considers that the writers might understand their own work perfectly well, but that they are "ninety per cent opaque to all other intelligent species on the planet." He also thinks that the instructional articles are not entertaining, and conversely that the entertaining articles are not instructional.

Unfortunately, I found his letter to be a good example of what he is complaining about -- obfuscation. Although the general idea came across all right (or else I wouldn't have been able to give the above paraphrase) I'm not sure that I understood all the rest of the letter -- and I consider myself a pretty understanding sort of guy (in Paul's terms) since I have understood pretty much everything I've published in Vector as editor. Perhaps a few examples rather than only sweeping generalisations would have helped, because without evidence I'm very much inclined to regard them as unfounded sweeping generalisations.

However, Paul, if you would care to expand your letter, and quote examples from Vector in evidence and support of your argument, I will be happy to consider it for Standpoint next issue.

David Pringle, who mentioned Interzone more times (5) than Vector (4), and whose letter I therefore took to be an advertisement for Interzone rather than a serious letter. Not that David isn't serious about Interzone, of course; he is on the editorial collective, after all. But catch me failing for that one and giving Interzone free publicity like that! Interzone indeed!

interzone

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