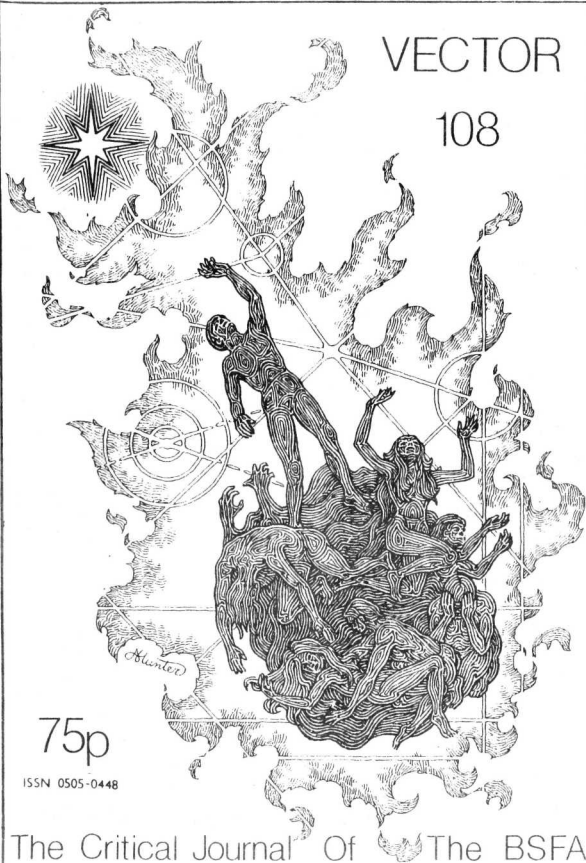


VECTOR

108



75p

ISSN 0505-0448

The Critical Journal Of The BSFA

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# Editorial

I doubt if many of you would be surprised if I said that science fiction is in 'the big time'. The fact that American publishers are paying \$1.5 million dollars for Herbert's Dune 5 and \$1 million for Clarke's 2010: Odyssey Two only helps to reinforce this view. But it was not truly brought home to me until I read The Bookseller's list of best selling paperbacks. The top three are - The One Tree by Donaldson, Midnight's Children by Rushdie and God Emperor of Dune by Herbert. Science fiction/fantasy seems to have been taken up by the general populace. No longer is it a minority interest genre. I feel it is therefore a useful exercise to think back to my own grass roots and try and work out why I still read S.F.

Have you ever been roller-skating? I ask this not from a purely academic point but as someone who has gone through the embarrassment of trying to stay on his feet for longer than two seconds. (The sport has certain similarities to editing a society science fiction magazine!) My monodrama happened last weekend when my wife and I decided to take our German student to the Herne-Bay Pier roller-skating rink. Once there, much to our amazement, our student whizzed round at 3 laps per minute while Liz and I tried desperately to make it round the rink once without falling over. I never managed it and quickly retired from the rink to sit among the spectators and nurse my bruised anatomy. There are limits to my pride! From this vantage point I could see all the skaters from a birds-eye-view, a microcosm of humanity, as always, scurrying in circles. My attention was soon drawn to a young girl who had attempted a move beyond her capability and, as a result, her leg was now protruding at an odd angle. For some reason, which I cannot fully understand, the reaction of the other skaters to the injured girl reminded

me of something Brian Aldiss said in a recent speech. To paraphrase him, who is in turn quoting from a letter to Wells "The story of the Afterwards that is sf's true subject, the perspective by which all is to be judged... Our motivations are curiosity, guilt, and impatience with the brevity of life." The link to the girl is fairly obvious, the crowd were curious to see what was wrong with her, but they were a bit guilty because of this curiosity but they were also concerned about the ease of the accident. When faced with other people's tragedies life does seem very brief.

Aldiss's comments seem to ring true but you have difficulty in defining exactly what he means. Was he talking about our motives for writing, for reading sf or both? I suppose if the glove fits....

Curiosity can be split into many different segments. But I am going to define it as the 'curiosity of science'. I am curious about science e.g. exploration of space, but it is only a surface curiosity. I am interested in man and his present limitations but I find myself drawing the line at abstract details. If I relate this to the fiction I read, I enjoy reading Arthur C. Clarke because his work concerns itself with the curiosity of man, a vision of man's ingenuity, but on the other side of the coin I can only enjoy the work because it is a sterile concept. I realise that it is only make-believe and treat it as such. A writer who attempts to fill the same area is Ben Bova but he does not just give us his concepts he also tries to force reality into them. He attempts to strike a balance between the reality of man in his environment and the reality of the future. It is a balance that I feel cannot be successfully made as either man or science must be the protagonist. For example, in Clarke's The Fountains of Paradise the orbital elevator is the protagonist. Clarke, recognising this, made little attempt to give it competition.

Let me skip Guilty and continue with Brevity Of Life. To my eyes this is a simple one and it is what attracts us all to science fiction. Yes, that's right, good old sense of wonder. We read  
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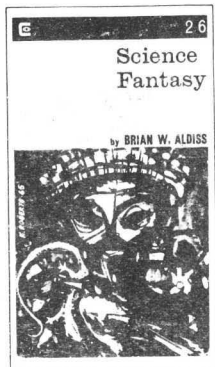
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No, not a comment on the editorial but rather a plea for material and artwork. Vector is a society magazine and it would be nice if it could publish more articles on the science fiction genre by members of the society. You don't know what to write about? How about an appreciation of one aspect of your favourite author's work? How about an article on the past and present British science fiction magazines? Or, what about an article on sf book artists? If you think you lack ideas write to me I've got a file full of them! What about doing an interview? I won't say that all authors will welcome you with open arms, but remember most authors love publicity. I can help with introductions, names and addresses etc. Even questions!

May I also make a desperate plea for artwork. The only point I would like to make is that it must be of a very high quality. I would suggest that you do not try and do a cover first of all - by all means do a full page illustration, then I can put the headings on if I decide to use it. Don't forget all artwork should be A4 size, not Vector size, the printer does the reduction. Smaller illustrations are also very welcome.



## OF MEN AND MACHINES

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KEITH ROBERTS, although one of the best British science fiction writers, is also one of the least known. The quality and style of his writing was brought home to me by his recent novel Molly Zero, which I urge you all to read. Therefore, I was pleased when Keith Roberts agreed to this postal interview. I found it fascinating reading - I believe you will too.

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How young Dorothy takes us all to task for reading book reviews...Simon Gosden agrees that nothing has "gone wrong", and many other letters. A couple of the letters were actually intended as "Standpoint" articles but as the column, for the time being, has been suspended, I have published them as letters. I hope Dorothy and David do not mind too much.... As you can see the letter column has not yet got a title. So, as I was stumped for an idea, I thought why not run a competition. Whoever comes up with the best title, 5 words or less, by next issue, will receive a copy of The Man Who Had No Idea by Thomas Disch.



# Science Fantasy

JAEL CRACKEN, KEITH ROBERTS  
ALAN BURNS, PHILIP WORDLEY



## HE THAT PLAYS THE KING Chris Morgan.....18

COLIN KAPP'S Cageworld series has recently been published by New English Library. As part of the promotional tour for the books he gave a lecture to The Birmingham SF Group. Many thanks to those involved for permission to publish. Also, my thanks to Colin Kapp and, of course, Chris Morgan.

With the number of science fiction groups that now exist I'm sure that there is a lot of material e.g. interviews and speeches, which would be of interest to Vector readers. If you could get copies (cassette tapes?) to me I will do the transcribing.

## INTO THE ARENA Ian Watson.....24

Those of you who received my previous magazine will recognise the above title from a series of articles written by Ian Watson. Understandably, Ian was reluctant to continue the column in Vector as six articles a year is rather more than the two he had to write for Arena SF. However, he has agreed to write two articles a year which puts me on the spot to find two more writers to write two articles each. Much to my pleasure Chris Priest has also agreed

# Science Fantasy

JAEL CRACKEN, PHILIP WORDLEY  
KEITH ROBERTS



to contribute two articles. For the third person we will have to wait and see. Each article is a separate identity and will not necessarily bear any relation to the one before. Which, from my point of view, makes it all the more fun as I never know what is going to appear! Ian's article is certainly different..

I hope you will forgive me for carrying over the title Into the Arena. Into the Vector, does not really work.

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Reviews by Roy Owen, Ian Watson, John Hobson, Cherry Wilder, Brian Smith, David Langford and Paul Kincaid of books by May, Lem, Martin & Tuttle, Diamond, Shaw, Herbert and Wolfe. By the way, Vector's Choice is, in the opinion of the reviewers and myself, the best book of the issue. See if you agree with our choice.

## ARTWORK

All artwork this issue is by Alan Hunter. My thanks Alan for helping me out at such short notice. I hope there will be more artists next issue.

# Of Men And Machines

## Keith Roberts interviewed by Paul Kincaid

I think it is worthwhile prefacing this interview with a few words to say how it came about. I have long had a keen appreciation of Roberts' work, and when the opportunity was presented to prepare one of the B.S.F.A. Bibliographies on him I was quick to seize the opportunity. Re-reading his work for the article was one of the great pleasures of last summer. With the first draft of the article completed, however, I was left with an even keener awareness of how good books like Pavane, The Chalk Giants and Molly Zero were; and a curiosity about the man behind them. Under Geoff Rippington's promptings I turned that curiosity into this interview. Since the interview was prompted by my article for the Bibliography, some of the questions and answers make reference to it. The Bibliography itself will be available from the B.S.F.A. this summer.

**KINCAID:** How do you feel your work as an artist has affected your writing, and vice versa?

**ROBERTS:** Although I qualified as a book illustrator I've never been an artist in the 'fine arts' sense; I'm a commercial visualiser, finisher and copywriter. Since I've always kept the two sides of my life determinedly separate, there's really no connection at all; 'artwork' is what I do to earn a crust, and that's about it. In fact the odd times when I've been asked to illustrate my own stories I've felt rather disinclined, and have usually only given in on being threatened with the alternative ministrations of some really dire hack. What I did think had a profound effect was the art training, which is rather difficult to explain. I did actually once try, in The Inner Wheel. Libby Maynard, the central figure of the middle novelet, talks at some length about something she calls the 'fact of

Art', using as an illustration poor Vincent's 'Yellow Chair'. She says that she has suddenly realized not simply when and where he painted it, but why. Although in her case the revelation had come as a result of what she somewhat inelegantly describes as a 'bunk-up' at an art school hop, I think a similar moment must come for everybody who undergoes what used at least to be a fairly arduous training. Visual perception alters certainly; but that's in the nature of being an effect rather than a cause. Getting the right yellow for the daffodil petals ceases to be the be-all and end-all thing it once was; it reduces to a facet of something immeasurably larger, a world-view that isn't lost even if one ceases to practice. Although I dislike their semantic loading, 'amateur' and 'professional' are words that in their way hint at that same divide. I think I'm a 'professional' writer; if I am, then it comes about as a result of trans-

ference from another discipline. Which will possibly strike you as mere circumlocution, but I can't do any better. Another NDD would probably understand, but then there'd be no verbal communication anyway; we'd simply grunt at each other, mutter 'Smart sod' and leave it at that. It's a ticklish area where words cease to have their traditional values; which I suppose is fair enough. After all, if words could do everything, we wouldn't need the visual arts in the first place.

**KINCAID:** Do you ever feel you made the wrong decision in following writing rather than art, and in choosing to write sf?

**ROBERTS:** There are really several questions here. On a purely personal level, opting to study art in the first place was a disaster; I was set for a first class Academic career and threw it away on a whim, which is why I'm now a backstreet hack instead of heading up a nice safe University department, which I've no doubt I'd have been quite capable of doing. Though I've heard Academics complain because they didn't study art, so maybe that's a case of the grass in the next field always being greener. The writing, such as it was, came along much later, largely as an attempt to clay back into an area where I was much happier and that I frankly feel I was much better at. As for writing sf; I've explained this many times, the last in the little Intro I did for your article. It was rather like being dropped into a funnel. Everything's genre; romantic novels, crime and mystery, cowboy and all the rest. In the sixties, sf offered at least a relative freedom; so in a way the choice was made for me. It's since been argued many times, by friends whose opinions I have respected, that that's a spurious justification, that sf writers are born rather than made and that I'd have gravitated instinctively to the medium even if the market choices had been wider. Which isn't a thing I can really answer; all I can say is that that was my thought process at the time. Or appeared to be my thought process, though I suppose it's

possible that in some sense I was fooling myself. It's certainly true that there are massive imaginative restrictions on the 'classic English novel' that I'd ultimately have chafed at and transgressed. I'm old enough to remember the shock and amazement when Golding's Lord of the Flies first hit the shelves; one dazed critic called it 'an earthquake in a petrified forest', or something of that order. What he'd done, of course, was simply to write the best sf book ever; but since it didn't have a label on it, nobody realized. I've always had a lurking feeling that there might be 'mainstream' readers somewhere who would like my work; but since by your account it's baffled a lot of fans, that has to remain a moot point.

**KINCAID:** You are not, I believe, a full-time writer. How do you earn your living?

**ROBERTS:** I think I've already covered this fairly fully. Since I've never been able to live on my books - or never seriously tried - they simply had to be fitted in round other commitments. Hopefully this hasn't had any effect on the writing as such; but the manner of its production has frequently been bizarre. The law of sod being what it is, I've always been certain of a flood of other work if I was pushing for a deadline. And vice versa, of course. I've frequently sighed for the balmy life of those fortunate souls who write for two hours a day or whatever and then have to drift out to recharge their psychic batteries; but as far as I'm concerned it's never been on. With Molly, since I'd promised her not to a publisher but to my agent by a fixed date, I finished up working twelve hour Saturday and Sunday stints, though I later had to drop that to ten because I was nacking myself. Like I said, I'm a professional; and 'deadline' in my trade is a word that would resuscitate a corpse. All of which had I suppose one useful aspect. Early on I developed, perforce, a knack of dropping a story and picking it up again at the most unlikely moments with no real loss of continuity. Again, Molly Zero is a case in point. For a whole variety of

reasons, she was dropped at one stage for six calendar months; I give out ten cent cigars (of not very good quality) to anybody who can spot the join.

**KINCAID:** How do you write?

**ROBERTS:** The first, obvious answer is 'God alone knows'. The second, almost equally predictable, is 'on a typewriter', which isn't quite as facetious as it sounds. There's at least one feted modern novelist who has coyly confessed to working in longhand, with a very soft pencil, on the backs of old BBC scripts. That way he feels he isn't wasting paper, while since the pencil makes no sound the impertinence of trying to be creative doesn't frighten him so badly. To which my only reaction, I'm afraid, is yuckkkk. Certainly in my peculiar situation I've never been able to afford such transports of modesty; time is always short, my longhand gets illegible and my wrist cramps easily. As to method - which perhaps is really what you mean - that tends to vary widely, and has certainly changed a lot over the years. My first, rather wild system was to slam everything through somehow in one draft from start to finish, then go back and start developing and cleaning up. Certainly *Furies* was done that way and the next couple of books after, plus my first three or four years of shorts. But since I tend to be a four or five draft person, and maybe because I was tackling slightly more demanding themes, the method finally became a bugbear; I think I was ultimately cured of it by *Boat of Fate*, the historical I was talking about. The degree of backtracking required virtually made it imperative to finish each section as I went, since when it's always been a case of 'Eric, or Little by Little' At least finishing as one goes avoids the nightmare of a two or three week stint of copy tying, which I don't think I could face any more.

**KINCAID:** Can you think of any one person who has had a particular effect upon your work?

**ROBERTS:** By 'person' I wonder if you

8.

mean writer-type person or other. If the former, the question is a honeyed trap. Kipling exploded on me at a very tender age, later Shakespeare, Welles, the World War I poets or most of them, Tennyson, Golding, Lord Lytton, Homer, the Gawain Poet and other odd bods as disparate as Bradbury and John Masters. They jointly made me want to have a go at the medium myself, so I suppose their effect must be profound; but already I hear the ripples run out. 'Tee-hee, Roberts thinks he can write like everybody you can mention all rolled up in one. . . ' Whereas the real truth is of course profoundly different; the only result a moderately decent background has is to make me giddy trying to decide which Deity to prostrate myself before first. As to other 'persons'; I suppose there's really only one. At KGS I was fortunate enough to be taught for a brief time by E E Kirby, the gentleman who once fostered H E Bates and whose methods would turn a modern progressive hairless overnight. One of his favourites was to set us to learn Tennyson in fifteen or twenty line chunks, which he would then mark on punctuation; everybody was assumed to know the words, and so of course they always did. At a half mark for a misplaced comma, a full mark for a misplaced semicolon and so on up the scale it was amazing how quickly even the diligent could clock up demerits. The long term result has possibly not been wholly to my advantage. There are only two people in the whole wide world who can punctuate, E E Kirby and myself; I can't even read Defoe for it. While since no editor to whom God gave breath has ever been able to restrain his quivering red Biro, I've lived the last sixteen or so years in a state of teeth-grinding rage.

**KINCAID:** Who do you write for?

**ROBERTS:** Another nasty little quagmire of a question. Though it's one I've recently had to try to answer for myself. There was a time when I'd have said unequivocally, 'me'. Leastways my best work - or what I deem to be my best work - has always been done under the influence

of some fairly strong compulsion, which in its turn has proceeded from something seen or experienced or occasionally read about in 'real' life. So I suppose there must have been some sort of catharsis there, which by definition can only be a personal thing. On the other hand I've never been able, although it will probably sound pompous, wholly to dismiss the notion that a 'book' isn't a book until it's being read, in the same way that the pile of band parts aren't the music. So the notion of the sock drawer, which may very well come about if things go on as they have been, holds no appeal. On the other hand one can't really 'write' for an audience of whom, in the nature of things, one can never expect to know, or meet, other than the smallest fraction. I think it's a case of pinging off call-signs in a sort of 'Is there anybody out there?' fashion. Usually, it seems there isn't; but occasionally, there is.

**KINCAID:** What difference did you find between writing historical and science fiction?

**ROBERTS:** My 'anti-ghetto' attitude is well known, at least to my friends; so I'm tempted simply to write 'none whatsoever', and leave it at that. However the question is in fact quite complex and deserves something better in the way of answers.

In certain respects of course there was no difference. The same number of grinding hours had to be put in; there were the same seemingly-endless rewrites, the same battles to force words into some sort of an acceptable shape, the same self-doubtings, the same huge 'post-parturition' depression. In other ways though my one essay into historical fiction was a totally new writing experience; and one that for a variety of reasons I don't think will ever be repeated. The main and I suppose most obvious stumbling-block was the amount of research involved. Which isn't to say I haven't researched everything I've done to the best of my ability; but here the difference was qualitative. If I could give an illustration; in The Furies, the first novel I did, I decided for plot reasons that my

main character would have to steal and drive a Saracen APC. I hid me to the library, and soon turned up a manual on the damned things; I found they were Rolls-Royce engined, that they had Daimler preselect gearboxes and that the chassis are built by Alvis. Which took me precisely nowhere. Nowhere could I find out what colour they were painted inside, what the ride was like on bumpy ground, how loud a blat the smoke grenades made when fired; everything, in fact, that I needed to know. Various Machiavellian attempts to get a trip in one likewise failed, so I was stymied. The problem was finally solved by a chance encounter with an extremely helpful Territorial who'd been on manoeuvres in one the weekend before. A half hour's chat, a couple of beers and I was home and dry. To my question about the smoke discharges he simply looked wry. 'Poke your head in a dustbin,' he said, 'and get somebody to bang the end with a sledge-hammer.' The phrase pleased me so much it was finally transferred intact into the novel. To all intents and purposed, I'd been on manoeuvres in a Saracen too.

Now transfer the problem and I think you'll see the difficulty. I'd chosen the collapse of Roman Britain, a complex and obscure period at the best of times; I had my lists of places, dates and names, I'd wangled a seminar with a top archeology professor, but still I didn't know what it was like to wear a Roman battledress. Nor, in the nature of things, could I ever find out. I reached a stage of desperation where I'd have given ten years of my life for ten minutes' chat with a military Tribune of the early fifth century; but that of course was mere unproductive fantasy. Certainly I decided that the phrase 'historical novel' is in fact a contradiction of terms, that such a beast can't actually exist. I was saved from banging my head on the ground by a sudden shocking realization. The Romans revered the Greeks who of course gave them their civilisation; but if a Greek city rebelled, the ensuing massacre was usually frightful. The Americans love the Brits; but suggest to an American that our way of life, as

well as being cute and quaint, might actually be better than his and you've instantly got a very angry man. Across the world the Vietnam war was raging; and it seemed I had my key. 'Obey our laws, and we'll build you towns,' said Stilicho, my great Generalissimo of the West. 'Take up our customs, and we'll give you schools. Go your own way, and we'll crucify you. . . . After that, the hardware ceased to matter. Men and empires are the great unchanging factors; the fifth century was the modern world, and that's how, finally, I played it. It was the only way, certainly, that I could make it work.

**KINCAID:** In my article I have referred more than once to your cyclic view of history; do you in fact hold this view?

**ROBERTS:** This is handy, because it slots in neatly with my rather long answer above. I suppose after that expo all I need say is 'yes', assuming that that's what you mean by a cyclic view. In the broader sense of the term Pavane is actually cyclic rather than alternate, although the point isn't laboured. I do sometimes wonder though if sf, in particular the English 'disaster school' novel, doesn't rather force this point of view on the people who get involved with it. John Brunner once challenged me, in the 'good old days' of the Hatton Garden Globe, to explain why in all alternate history novels the state of technology is invariably inferior to ours. I had to admit I couldn't, though now I'd probably answer in one word. Atavism. . .

**KINCAID:** The first stories from The Chalk Giants appeared a long time before the novel; can you tell me something about the development of the book?

**ROBERTS:** I honestly can't remember, but I think it was really mostly to do with the vagaries of publishing. As to the development; obviously it was in my head a long, long time. I think the germ of it was there when I was working on Pavane, though I had a little more living to do before I

could come to it. On the purely factual side, 'The God House' was the first of the pieces written, after which the rest simply spread forward and back. So if there is a pivot, it's probably somewhere there. Certainly the 'modern' opening was the last section to be finished; and at furious speed too, otherwise I'd have missed my slot. One positive link with Pavane is that Becky in 'The White Boat' is actually the first appearance of the character Michael Coney later christened 'multigirl', a phrase I still rather like. After which of course I used her again and again; her last appearance in print was as late as 'Our Lady of Desperation', as the dangerously attractive nymphet who was really the catalyst for the entire piece. Though essentially more diffuse, she had become a sort of all-purpose standby character on whom I felt I could rely; a little like Mike Moorcock's great Cathy Cornelius perhaps, a fictional lady I've always loved dearly.

**KINCAID:** The Chalk Giants has aroused a considerable amount of confusion and controversy on the part of your readers; do you wish you'd made your point more clearly?

**ROBERTS:** Controversy, of a sensible sort, is always good; I'm sorry to hear about the confusion though, this is the first I knew of it. As to wishing I'd made my point more clearly; that's a bit of a poser. In the first place, I'm unsure exactly what you mean by 'the point'. There's a theme, certainly; the whole thing's an extended study of sexual guilt, as Pavane returned again and again to the theme of unquestioning and excessive loyalty. In that sense it's very much a 'black Pavane', and I wouldn't have thought there was any real problem over that. Leastways in your excellent article you seem rather to take it as a 'given'. As to a further point, I don't think I was trying for one; the theme itself was as much as I wanted to tackle between two covers. The only 'point' with which I had real difficulty was that Chalk Giants is first and foremost an erotic book; the only one, in fact, that I've ever

written. I found that in description I couldn't go beyond a certain clearly defined limit; leastways I could, but I felt furiously disinclined. It was another area where words seemed less than adequate; so in that sense perhaps the only truly successful publication was the French edition by Opta, which included by way of endpapers and frontispiece some of the most beautiful and erotic artwork I've ever seen. If you're interested in following this up, I talked about it quite a lot in an article for SF Foundation a year or so back; though without reproduction of the plates themselves the point is maybe still a little lost.

One further thought about this 'confusion'; I do wonder sometimes if folk don't create it for themselves, by looking for things that really aren't there at all. Both Pavane and The Chalk Giants are first and foremost story cycles, interlinked closely in space but fairly loosely in time; each piece can be read separately, each is hopefully fairly interesting and exciting in its own right and the real relationship is thematic rather than structural. They're not novels, and were never intended to be; though with the well-known low sales of short story collections both the respective publishers tended to push them as such. A far more bizarre thing was in fact done a few years back with the early short stories of Len Deighton, no less. A number of pieces, each excellent in themselves but having no relation at all, was strung together and presented as a sort of episodic novel covering the whole history of warfare. That must have puzzled a lot of folk sorely, though I never heard any shrill squeals of rage.

**KINCAID:** Your work shows a strong love of the English countryside, and, particularly in your early stories, an opposition to nuclear weapons. How do you stand on the popular issues of the environment and nuclear disarmament?

**ROBERTS:** I don't see how any sane person can be any other than an environmentalist and a unilateralist. Which will maybe surprise

all those left wing thickos who you assure me have recently been identifying me as some sort of capitalist child-devourer.

**KINCAID:** Later stories have been concerned with social decay. Do you see that happening in the world?

**ROBERTS:** First, I wonder exactly what you mean by social decay. In one sense society is always decaying; 'lest one good custom should corrupt the world,' etc. I certainly wouldn't be foolish enough to take up a wholly reactionary stance, and I make a continuous effort not to fall into the middleaged trap of bemoaning the 'good old days', largely because they weren't. As that mad gentleman Tony Capstick says in his classic record, 'Uz little 'eads all covered wi' purple blotches cos uz 'ad got ringworm. . .'. It was mercifully never quite that bad for me (maybe not for Mr Capstick either, I obviously wouldn't know) but I'm still old enough to remember those nasty little shoes that cracked across the instep, the greyness of austerity, the dull clothes in the streets. Now, after thirty or so years of NHS milk, youngsters of both sexes seem to have averaged a height gain of about six inches; some of them have even started to tower over me. That obviously can't be bad; there are longhaired mums, and pretty little bums, and a generation that sleeps around the way we never could but is passionately aware of global problems like the Third World. The only trouble is that for every gain there seems, inevitably, to be an equivalent loss. It was not a commonplace, at one time, to see fires in English city streets; now we have Brixton, and Toxteth.

Instantly I sense all those radical activists rearing up in their rage; they all seem to me to be rather binary folk, who only react when the right button is pressed, and these are emotive words. I would recommend them to Molly Zero, but since I don't think they'd have the attention span it would be rather a waste of time. I would like to glance, very briefly, at these apparently-maligned stories in Ladies From Hell. You do say in

your article that in every instance the menace seems to come from the left. That's as maybe; I think the term itself demands further analysis, but we'll let it rest. I'll make just two points about the collection: first that they are largely comedies, though admittedly somewhat on the dark side, second that each one, to me at least, is a story of hope. In 'Our Lady Of Desperation' (which incidentally satisfies me as much as anything I have ever done) we have a basic confrontation between two polar types of mentality. The fact that one represents some sort of 'Government' force and the other some type of 'artist' is basically immaterial; the opposing types could have come into confrontation in many other walks of life. And are doing, I have no doubt, every day God gives. The details, obviously, were amusing to work out; but having read the outline of the 'negatax' system devised by the Social Democratic Alliance (created, by the way, almost exactly five years before its actual foundation) anybody who took the piece literally must at some point have suffered a frontal lobotomy. 'The Shack' is really a story of ordinary folk, in this case the 'truckers', being pushed just a quarter of an inch too far while 'The Ministry of Children' was initially triggered by a comment by the then Education Minister about the 'survival' of intelligence. It struck me with cold horror; because intelligence, for me, is the mark of humanity. If we treat the one with such cynical contempt, then the other must needs be in jeopardy; and in the story it's the latter that wins out. The young girl, driven beyond herself, performs a wild act that succeeds in focussing the attention of the nation; I could only wish it could happen in real life. These days, when Comprehensive school-girls suicide, they are hastily cremated and then declared, a year or so later, probably to have been pregnant.

'The Big Fans' is a bit of a throwback that I wouldn't take too much time over; though it does, in its rather melodramatic way, raise what seems to me to be a serious

question. Although the technology for wind-powered generation has been available for years - a previous American administration spent millions in research - no British government has seen fit to take it up on anything like a major scale, or even to avail itself of the figures that have been offered. One wonders whether the real problem isn't economic rather than political; how many folk would be thrown out of work by the advent of the 'silver windmills', and how would they use their time? As things stand, even the bossman of my dreaded 'machine wreckers' shows, at the end, a broad streak of compassion. 'This shouldn't have happened,' he says when the innocent bystander is hurt. 'I'll get someone to you. . . ' More than you see, almost any night, on the bloody telly; it seems, in fact, to argue a large and unjustified faith. Or maybe all these so-called political pundits can put up a better case for humanity, that I've somehow failed to grasp.

The last story of the collection, 'Missa Privata', in fact started with my own father's death; though I later moved the venue of the ceremony to Golder's Green. I also got a good friend to drive me - at appropriate pace - from that smokestained, strangely lovely spot to the Albert Hall. By which time the absence-presence of Stella, my little invented Sopran, had become almost too much to bear. None of which, as I realize, merits the story for any special consideration; but I still see it as the most hopeful of all the pieces. Is it important, after all, who rules the country? What uniforms my transmuted traffic wardens wear? Stella fights upward, from a place of ultimate dark; and her final defeat is in fact her final victory. She describes herself, at one point, as a woman Jonah; is she also, perhaps, a woman Jesus?

Coming back to your question, after a long circumlocution; yes, I see social decay. And moral decay to match it. But I also see hope. Could some of these funny little people who you assure me have been having the odd snipe look at the stories again? And widen their minds by a fraction, before it all gets a bit too late?



# Letters Of Comment

**Dorothy Davies,  
3 Cadets Row,  
Faringdon, Oxon.**

In a five roomed cottage (2 down 3 up) you wouldn't have thought there were many places a copy of Vector could crawl away and hide, but that's exactly what Vector 106 has done. ((( They like dark places. ))) Therefore I am incapable of telling you the name of the person (upon whom all praise and honours be showered) who said something to the effect of - why don't we have a resume of, a book and not a review, and let us all make up our own minds.

I am concerned about reviews because a bad review could cost a publisher a good deal of money in that the reviewer, who is after all only expressing a personal opinion, may slate it and stop you out there buying it. That author might have difficulty getting their next book accepted by that publisher. You could, unintentionally, be nipping a career in the bud. (Pause for readers to shout the names of writers whose careers should have been nipped in the bud....)

For a book to be published, someone, somewhere, must have liked it. It could be the editor at the publishing house or a reader it went out to, but someone did say 'yes'. No matter how bad a book might seem, remember someone liked it. (It reminds me of something my mother used to say "at least his mother loved him".)

I don't read reviews. In the first place I can't afford to buy books. On that basis alone there is no point in my spending time reading reviews of books I can't buy. In the second place, I occasionally receive books on which the publisher wants a

market report. I like to come to such books with an open mind.

Such a book was the Somtow Sucharitkul book reviewed by Jim England. I have to tell you now that my report was the complete opposite of Mr. England's review. In fact, the only point on which we agree is that the book is depressing. My personal opinion is that the book is a haunting one, in its imagery, and a fascinating look into the Japanese mind, with its traditions based on death with honour, fear of losing face, perfect imperfection, and cherry blossom. It is also, for me, a damning indictment of the Japanese whaling industry. From these few lines you can see I read the book entirely differently from Mr. England.

I wonder how many times you've read a book, and then read a P.I. review of the same book, and were left wondering if you did in fact read the same book? My example is a single one out of the hundreds you could come up with. You must be aware that your BSFA mailing often looks like nothing more than a copy of "who printed what during the last 2 months and was it any good, answer on a postcard to -" with half Vector and all P.I. devoted to reviews! (and Matrix reviewing fanzines too...)

My vote is for resumes of recently published books, with no opinions. That way more books could get mentioned and less people get hurt. Let a writer stand or fall on your considered opinion, the great book buying public, not on the say so of one person. Anyone agree?

(Having said all that, Joseph Nicholas has a review of mine of a particularly appalling book!)

((( Now come on Dorothy this isn't fair - if I get many letters like yours poor old Joseph will end up in an early grave. Actually, I know your comments are partly tongue-in-cheek (or, at least, I hope they are) but the points you make are worth answering as quite a few people seem to be of a like mind.

Firstly, let me say that a review in Vector or P.I. has very little, if any effect on book sales. For example, the U.S. publisher Berkley has printed 190,000 copies of The Earth Book of Stormgate by P. Anderson. Do you honestly believe that if we gave this book a bad review, the British publisher would

reject it? While, obviously the publishers (hopefully) strive for critical acclaim they are far more interested in sales figures. Even the smaller publishers take very little notice of reviews - I only wish the reverse was true! An isolated bad review will not "nip any authors career in the bud", poor sales possibly.

What you must bear in mind is that a review is aimed at two people; the author and the reader. The review should not only give a value judgement on the work but should also increase the reader's, and author's, awareness of the book being discussed. To put it in a rather quaint term, the review should be a 'guiding light'. I urge you Dorothy to read the reviews in future issues, and when you have time, write them. As I'm sure you know by writing reviews you can get a much better understanding of the process of writing a story.

Secondly, one of your comments did slightly irritate me as you imply that Vector readers do not have a mind of their own. A review is one person's opinion, Vector readers are perfectly capable of making their own decision on accepting or not the reviewer's views.

Lastly, I am aware that we have in the past published a fair number of reviews. I will strive for a more balanced publication but it is difficult to get the material needed. I hope Dorothy that you will remind me if I seem to be straying off the chosen path..... )))

Simon Gosden,  
25 Avondale Road,  
Rayleigh,  
Essex.

Martyn Taylor on reviewing Pictures at an Exhibition asks the question "what has gone wrong?" In my opinion - nothing. The concept of a theme anthology is not a new one, Arena: Sports SF is one that springs to mind, but the great thing about this particular work is that it has been produced at reasonable cost by a small independent publisher and, having bought my copy at W.H. Smiths, it seems to have been accepted readily by the

large distributors. Mr Taylor admits to enjoying some of the stories and I would think one would have to be a very special person to like ALL the stories in a multi-author anthology.

Pictures, though, does a lot more than this, it introduces two new authors (one wonders where else these authors would find publishers ready to print their work) amongst a British cast which in itself is an admirable and remarkable thing these days. To me Pictures is one of the better things to have emerged this year.

When I compare the reviews of Pictures with the enjoyment it gave me, even though I did not like all the stories, to the review of Smile on the Void, I was frankly astounded. Smile on the Void was for me a real effort to read, and ultimately a complete let down. One wonders whether the reviewers are reviewing books for us the consumers or for their own intellectual pleasure.

It seemed a shame to me that such an innovative and potentially exciting (as it seeks to break the asphyxiating cartel of the major publishing houses) work should have received such bad press and on the whole negative reviews from the mouthpiece of the very organisation that should be supporting British S.F. ((I believe I've answered most of your points in response to Dorothy's letter but, let me emphasise that the purpose of a review is to discuss the words within the book - not the package itself. I'm sure that all the members of the B.S.F.A. welcome a new independent publisher, but I feel we would be doing the authors and readers a disservice if we made 'allowances' because it was a new publisher. It seems to me that it is on the same level as publishing a longer review of a hardback than a paperback because it costs more to buy. Do you believe that's right? )))

P. Holdsworth,  
5 Ruskin Grove,  
Deighton,  
Huddersfield,  
Yorkshire.

I was reading Alan Dorey's Inter-

esling 'Standpoint' in Vector 107: 'SF in the Modern World'. Alan poses the question "Where is SF today?" - and an idea occurred to me which is partly relevant to the question i.e. the supposed odyssey of SF from 'Second-Hand Wave', (to coin a phrase), to 'New Wave' - especially in the UK.

Now, the B.S.F.A. has in its archives valuable information concerning this trend. It can be found on the Member's forms of application which they completed on joining. A question was put to the novitiate "What are your four favorite science fiction authors?"

My suggestion is this: Can this information be used - along the lines of the ASF/Analog 'An Lab' to show the trends (over a period of time) of the B.S.F.A. member's of the type of science fiction that they like to read. Possibly something like a Standard or Quartile Deviation Chart! Personally, and I'm only guessing, I think that such a chart would pack a few surprises, especially in the New Wave camp. We could find that the tail is wagging the dog.

It would be interesting to see other member's viewpoints on this. ((( It certainly would be an interesting idea. I'm sure that if you write to Sandy Brown he will tell you whether it is feasible and will pass the information along. I look forward to your analysis. Nice of you to volunteer! )))

David V. Barrett,  
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Harrogate,  
N. Yorks.

In Vector 107, Alan Dorey spoke of the unhappy state of SF today. His article prompted the following thoughts, some of which recapitulate in different terms what he had to say about SF readers, writers and publishers; I also offer a few ideas about what we could do if we had a mind to.

It strikes me every now and then that science fiction readers fall into two categories, referred to at least implicitly by many of us as US and THEM. For the ease of argument, let's make the implicit explicit. We are the Ivory towered experts on SF; they are what used to be known as the GBP, or that

section of it which buys sci-fi. We are long-term readers, critics and (mainly) amateur writers; They just read the stuff that is available. It is easy for US to dismiss THEM as fairly mindless (any THEM, by definition almost, is mindless), and non-discriminating because they read more Perry Rhodan than Chris Priest. We readily condemn as commercial rubbish a novel which thousands of THEM enjoy. We are the self-styled arbiters of taste, style and quality - but since when have the Paris fashion houses had much impact on what you see walking the streets of Rochdale?

My point is that the Perry Rhodan books (I hesitate to call them novels) and their ilk, like the poor, are always with us. I'm horribly afraid that publishers will continue producing pap, because that is what sells. We may be more discerning than THEM, but WE are, and always will be, in the minority. Can we honestly expect publishers, who are, after all, in it for the money, to cater to the wishes of a minority, however well-qualified? They will continue to publish millions of copies of low intelligence, mass market, low quality, high space adventure books whatever we say. ((( It's a real sin to give people enjoyment. )))

What we must hope is that, alongside the dross, a few quality works are published. This is, in fact, the normal state of affairs, but mercurial fashions (disaster novels, Star Wars spin-offs, etc.), and times of economic uncertainty mean that there will be periods when the publishers are only willing to churn out guaranteed best-sellers, and are not prepared to take a gamble. But if the old lady of Downing Street is to be believed (and there are positive indications), we're beginning to come out of the recession, so things may improve.

However, while the publishers may be understood, if not excused, for publishing bestselling trash, there is absolutely no excuse for their publishing low-quality novels by non-big-name writers, as they so often do, especially when they are at the same time turning away so many good sf novels.

Similarly there is no excuse for the Big Name authors submitting works which they must realise are only accep-

ted because of the proven selling ability of their name. If one is in the fortunate position where almost anything one writes will be bought, one has a responsibility to one's readers. That responsibility is all too often ignored. It takes time and effort, and thus lost money for both publisher and author, if a novel is repeatedly passed back for revision before it's eventual publication: by far the easier course is to publish and be damn'd to the Ideal of Excellence, and also to the sensitivities of discerning readers who, as I've said, are only a minority anyway, and so can safely be ignored.

What can we, this long-suffering minority, do about it? As I've indicated, perhaps not a great deal, but maybe more than we are doing at present. We're a pretty vocal minority, but only really amongst ourselves - and we already know the problem. The publishers and authors would not even notice if we boycotted the purchase of the offending works; an entirely negative approach is pointless.

We can, and do, entail that the B.S.F.A. Awards only go to deserving works; (but how many publishers, authors or readers would notice the absence of an Award?). How about having an 'Anti-Award', to be given to the author and publisher of the sf book most unworthy of publication? What I have in mind isn't 'Perry Rhodan's Christmas Songbook' or a typical Rabid Hole publication, but rather a lousy novel by a writer who should know better - supply your own examples! ((I bet we get 3000 different examples.. ))

We also need to become, not just vocal, but audible, to make of ourselves a pressure group. The list of B.S.F.A. Awards should be sent each year to every publisher of sf in Britain, if it isn't already. ((I believe it is sent to the relevant publishers. )) Copies of selected articles voicing our views, and selected book reviews, both laudatory and condemnatory, could also be sent on a regular basis to publishers - and, perhaps, to the book review editors of the Sunday papers, whose influence and



prestige often appears to be in inverse proportion to their understanding and enjoyment of fiction (not just science fiction). More people in the publishing and lit crit world need to be made aware of the B.S.F.A. and the views of its members.

It would also help if more sf readers, and sci-fi readers, to differentiate again between US and THEM knew of the B.S.F.A. The overwhelming majority of (non-member) sf readers, some of them long term, dedicated, discerning and intelligent one's, to whom I've spoken of the B.S.F.A., have never heard of it before. How many members do we have who are professional writers? Would it be too difficult for each of them to include in his bio in each book the simple fact that he is a member of the B.S.F.A.? Or for them to ask their publishers to print a small notice for the B.S.F.A. in each book? And again, how many bookshops with a large sf selection could we persuade to display a poster advertising the B.S.F.A.? If we could double our membership, we could double our influence.

No doubt I'll be accused of taking myself (and US) too seriously. But the question is, just how serious are we about increasing the quantity of quality sf published, and of introducing more readers to it? Do we want to be a snug little, smug little clique ('Members Only'), or do we want actively to do something to improve the state of sf in this country? ((I'm not going to comment on this letter as I am interested

In the readers views and I don't want to prejudge. However, I will say that the moral implications of David's comments do concern me. What right has the B.S.F.A. to be the sole judge and jury on books published. )))

Cherry Wilder,  
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West Germany.

The reviews of Riddley Walker by Russell Hoban in Vector 107 and elsewhere put me in mind of a British post-holocaust novel which I read in Australia during the sixties, namely Pig on a Lead by Derek Ingre. I have always been waiting to see this book re-discovered in an sf magazine. It is a bleak, atmospheric tale which impressed me very much; scenes and speech rhythms have remained all these years.

Brief summary: England has copped it again and just about everyone is dead, lying about, following vast last minute love-ins, in Stately Homes. The two survivors are an Old Man, a tramp, and the young lad he has raised, Danker, who tells the story of their wanderings through the land. They eat tinned food and have to take pot luck all the time. (Bloddy Kilt-E-Kat). They meet the Nutter, a mad intellectual, and at last, down on the South Coast, a few more promising survivors. The book is written in a remarkably thorough-going variety of Altered English...the Old Man is semi-literate and hasn't had anyone to talk to while the boy grew up.

As I said I remember the book quite well but I forgot the name of the author: I am indebted to Maxim Jakubowski, Bookman Extraordinaire, who came up with the name and an entry in Peter Nicholls's Encyclopaedia. I wonder if Derek Ingre wrote other things and where he is now. I think Pig on a Lead is well worth a big re-discovery. ((( If someone sends me a copy I will run a review of it in a later issue. Also, if anyone else knows of a book that needs re-discovering, please write in and tell me. If there is sufficient response we could continue the reviews on a regular basis. You never know, we might get a publisher to re-issue one of the books! )))

Nic Howard,  
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Mary Gentle raises a few interesting points in her article on contemporary horror fiction, in Vector 107.

I would balk at calling King's Firestarter a horror novel at all: it is a suspense/pursuit and chase story, with pseudoscientific and psychological underpinnings. Certainly it seems, to me at least, to have been written from a purely commercial point of view: as Mary says, it's a ready-made TV movie. We shall see. It is not a book that (unlike the best works of horror and the supernatural) gives the impression that the author had no choice but to write it.

There is, perhaps, the implication that 'pathological' and 'paranoia' could become 'sub-genres' of the horror genre. This would be a good thing, and would hopefully lead to such books as Firestarter not being labelled as 'horror'. I'm being too idealistic and elitist in all probability, though!

Dark Forces certainly cannot be promoted as a Dangerous Visions of the horror field. I think that editor McCauley was being too optimistic here (he was probably eyeing book-sales figures too!). Mary says, "The world is not as cosy as a western middle-class upbringing would have us believe. Supernatural horror fiction opens us to the possibilities of unknowable dangers - dangers of the body, mind, and soul." Well said: quite true. But she seems not to remember this in two stories she damns: Stephen King's "The Mist" and T.E.D. Klein's "Children of the Kingdom". Surely the point and horror impact of these stories are their situations: King's, set in a supermarket, and Klein's, set in bustling New York. After all, if you are not safe in your local supermarket or a huge city, then where in this world are you safe?

((( That's the letters for this issue. Please don't forget to write, without response Vector will never come alive! I also get lonely...ah..... )))

# He That Plays The King

Colin Kapp

interview by Chris Morgan

Colin Kapp is an English electronics engineer, now in his early fifties, who has been writing science fiction since 1958, with many of his stories appearing in magazines and anthologies edited by John Carnell. His books are: Transfinite Man (The Dark Mind) 1964, The Patterns of Chaos 1977, Manalone 1977, The Ion War 1978, The Unorthodox Engineers 1980, and the Cageworld series - Search for the Sun! and The Lost Worlds of Cropsus - both published in March 1982. As part of New English Library's publicity drive in connection with the Cageworld books, Colin Kapp visited Birmingham in March, to sign copies at Andromeda Bookshop and to talk to the Birmingham Science Fiction Group. The following is an edited transcription of his introductory remarks about the Cageworld series and of the question-and-answer session which followed it, with all the questions being asked by Chris Morgan.

The Cageworld series consists of four adventures in our Solar System after it has been breathtakingly augmented by the construction of concentric Dyson spheres at each planetary distance. A few extra suns have been added, too, for the purpose of light and heat. The cageworlds themselves are normal planets studding the equators of the Dyson spheres. And all this extra space has been necessitated by the continued growth of the human population. Now read on.....

The Cageworld series is a major new venture from New English Library which I was fortunate enough to be asked to write. The first two in the series have just been published, and there will be two more coming out later this year at approximately three-month intervals. Hopefully you'll like all four. They are adventures based around the same general theme. I don't wish to speak at all about the stories themselves. Rather, I want to take you on the adventure which I went through, which is the background detail which

had to be developed in order to support the series - all the nuts and bolts work before the series could be written.

Now I must admit that the idea for the series was put forward by Nick Webb, who is the Editorial Director of New English Library. Nick had what he thought was a good idea, and he went round looking for somebody to write it. Finally it got through onto my desk, and I looked at it, and I thought, well, this is a good idea, but I don't see it working quite like that. I want to do it my way. So I spoke to Nick - we

had a meeting up in London. He gave me his thoughts, I gave him mine. We went away to think about it, and each of us came back with ideas the other hadn't thought of. The result was a synthesis, which neither of us could have developed separately. This was something completely new for me, because I'd always worked alone on all my ideas. This was the first time I'd attempted to write something which was even partially conceived by somebody else. In the past I've never known whether I could develop an idea into a novel until I'd finished it, and only then had I sold it. Now here I was signing a contract to write four 60,000-word novels on a single theme, and I didn't know whether I could do it. It was quite a challenge to my imagination. A big challenge. It was quite fascinating to see where I could get to - places that I never thought of in the first place. Looking back, having written the whole thing, I can see this as a good example of creative publishing by Nick Webb. The Cageworld series isn't unique in this respect, and I think this approach to publishing is a good thing.

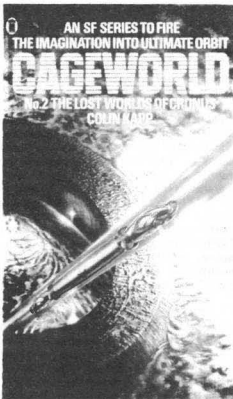
Two of Nick Webb's original precepts, which survived the process of discussion and synthesis, were that the speed of light would not be exceeded, or even closely approached (now, this was a great blow to me because I've always been used to getting my characters just where I wanted them by exceeding the speed of light if necessary, to suit myself), and the second was that the human race would continue to expand, to reproduce itself, exponentially. You've got an expanding population and you can't get rid of them by shooting them off to colonise the stars, so like it or not you're going to be stuck with a hell of a lot of people in the coming time, and what the hell do you do with them? Nick had his solutions to this, and I had mine. He said, "Use as much consistent science as you can." It wasn't possible to do that all the way through. I had to invent a few things.

But the population had to keep on expanding, and in order to keep the whole thing fairly credible I had to decide on a reasonable figure for this

expansion. At the moment the human race doubles itself every thirty years. I'm not talking about this country but about the world as a whole. Now, I could have taken a higher or lower figure, but that's the one that's current, so that's the one I decided to take for the purpose of the Cageworld series. The population of the world doubles every thirty years. What's so special about that? Let's look at it in simple terms. Let's postulate an island, say about the same size as Birmingham. On that island the population grows at our average rate, doubling every thirty years. Then one day you say, "Hang on, that's it. That is as many people as it's going to take." So when there's no more room, what are you going to do about it? You find a second island. Everything continues as before, with the population increasing. But in another thirty years you're going to need two more islands. Thirty years after that you need another four islands. So we've now populated eight islands, and we haven't got to the end of a century yet. This is not speculation; this is happening. This is the way in which our world's population is increasing at the moment. It's not just a theoretical exercise with figures.

I was talking about an island, but whatever you talk about - an island, a city, or the whole world - just how full can you expect to let it become so that everybody still has somewhere to live, enough room to live? Now we are talking about population density. What would be a reasonable number of people who could live in a square mile? Again, I went back to the official statistics. I looked at the figures for cities, and I got the population density figure for London for 1978: 4,378 people per square kilometre, which works out to over 11,000 people per square mile. For the purpose of my Cageworld books I decided to impose a population figure of only 10,000 people per square mile, so I've come down below what is actually happening.

Now, somebody's going to mention growing food and so on. Here again I can give you some statistics which will probably surprise you. Going back to the last war there was a campaign



called something like "dig for victory". Every little bit of ground in London and other big cities was used to grow food that people could eat. All the little back gardens, front gardens, pieces of waste ground, and so on, were used for the cultivation of useful plants. And the yield of crops per square mile - this is the surprising thing - was as great as for open fields. Because of the intensity of cultivation it compensated for the houses, roads and other such areas. And if you'd grown crops on flat rooves you could actually have produced a lot more than from agricultural land, where cultivation was not so intense.

But let's try, for a moment, to get away from populations, because populations are not what the Cageworld series is primarily about. It's supposed to be an adventure - a series of adventures. Getting back to the nuts and bolts, let's look at other things I had to consider. Taking an area about the size of the Solar System, I had to do without faster-than-light travel and I had to ask myself what was a reasonable and credible velocity to assume for a space vehicle, and how long could I assume that space voyages within the Solar System should last? If you get your velocity wrong your voyages could take sixteen or twenty years and you can be aged 95 before you get back from a particular adventure. This wasn't science fiction so much as a literary device to ensure an interesting story. I worked out where I wanted my characters and how long I could reasonably allow them in travelling time, and I was left with my velocities. Sometimes these were higher than I would have liked, but they couldn't be avoided. In fact, the size of the whole thing surprised me.

Getting back to the calculations, remembering we've got this population which doubles every thirty years, to fill our 2,4,8,16,32 islands, just how much space would we gain by taking the orbit of the Earth and building a Dyson sphere there which completely enclosed the Sun? How many times the surface of the Earth would this give us? It happens to be no less than 553 million times. So there you are: no problem of overcrowding - 553 million Earths. No population problem ever again. But



wait a minute: I said the population doubles every thirty years, so how many times can it double before you fill 553 million Earths? The answer is roundabout 25 times. Eventually this Dyson sphere gets filled up, too, and then what do you do? One of Nick Webb's original ideas was to have not just a Dyson sphere but to have a massive ball of matter, many millions of miles thick, surrounding the sun. It would be full of holes, like Swiss cheese, for human habitation. This seemed like a good idea, with a gigantic amount of space for the expanding population, until we did some calculations and found that towards the centre of it would be conditions of free-fall, you know, zero gravity, which would not be very pleasant to live under full time. Then around or close to the edge the gravity would be extremely great. So we had to think of something else, of some other shape to provide the living area. What we came up with was more Dyson spheres. You could build another shell out at the orbit of Mars, which gives you an area 2½ times the shell at Earth's orbit. Or you could travel out to the limits of the Solar System, at the furthest reach of Pluto's orbit, and you could build a shell there, too, which would give you a land surface a massive 1,700 times that of the Earth shell.

**MORGAN:** The majority of sf writers started reading and writing science fiction in their teens. Was this true with you?

**KAPP:** Yes, I was reading sf avidly, I suppose, before my teens. I was brought up on the old American pulps which I absolutely loved, and I always had ambitions to become an author. But not an sf author. I greatly admired Dornford Yates and I wanted to write something more like his "Berry" books. And by the time I was 16 or 17 I was fully convinced I was going to do it. But by the time I was 18 or 19 I knew it was never going to happen. Then I got married; children came along; you know. It was an ambition, a youthful dream, that I thought would never happen. Then, around the time I suppose I was about

thirty, I was working in a research laboratory and I had about three-quarters of an hour's travelling time each way on the train. I soon got fed up with reading the backs of other people's newspapers. At the time I was heavily involved with reading 'Galaxy' and 'Amazing' and things like that, and one day I got home, threw my latest magazine onto the floor - my wife will confirm this - and I said "This is absolutely terrible. These stories are shocking. I could do better than that." She said, "You're always saying that. Why don't you?" And I said, "Well, um, all right..." And I spent the next three or four weeks - all the spare time I had - working on a story. I think it was called "Life Plan". I sent it off to John Carnell, who was then editing 'New Worlds'. He accepted it. He came back to me with a note to say, "Please write some more." Which I did. I kept on writing, and from that time until very, very recently I never had a story rejected.

**MORGAN:** Why was it sf that you wrote rather than any other form of literature?

**KAPP:** I was highly involved with science. I worked in the radio valve industry initially, and latterly in aircraft instrumentation. Always I worked in industries which had a very high science content. I was naturally attuned to thinking in terms of physics, in terms of pressures, temperatures, characteristics of materials, things like that, and having been brought up on science fiction anyway, it was a natural field to write about.

**MORGAN:** Do you feel that your writing style is evolving in any particular direction?

**KAPP:** It's getting more complex, I think. More thoughtful. But this is not necessarily good because I think an open, more adventurous style is better. Now I tend to write, I think, in a more concentrated style. I don't think this is the right way to do it.

**MORGAN:** Which way would you like it to go?

**KAPP:** I was always a fan of science fiction adventures. I've never become an science fiction engineer in the proper sense of engineering. I think the most interesting novel which I've written is *The Wizard of Anhar-ite*, which was very, very light on science, concentrating more on adventure and characterisation. That is the kind of thing I think I should be writing now.

**MORGAN:** Why is it that you aren't?

**KAPP:** The market is very tight. I have to consider very carefully not what the fans, not what the readership, appear to want, but what the editors appear to want, which is not necessarily the same thing. At the moment, in order to be able to write at all one has to pay great attention to editorial direction, to what editors want. It's up to the fans to influence the editors. It's the editors who are dictating the direction of science fiction at the moment.

**MORGAN:** It always seems to me that the best known of all your work is your "Unorthodox Engineers" series of short stories, which of course appeared first in various volumes of *New Writings in Science Fiction*. Perhaps you'd like to tell the audience (a) whether you've written any more "Unorthodox Engineers" stories, and (b) whether the collection is likely to appear in paperback soon.

**KAPP:** Again, we're up against market forces and in the midst of a recession, both in this country and in the United States. Publishing anything at all is getting rather difficult. I have another "Unorthodox Engineers" story, cast in exactly the same mould, which neither my agent or I can sell. I would love, and I know the fans would love to see the "Unorthodox Engineers" collection published in paperback. We've tried and we've tried, and we've failed, my agent and I. The only hope I can see at the moment is that if the Cageworld series is successful then New English Library have promised to consider looking at taking up paperback rights. There are a lot of paperback rights of mine hanging about

because so much has gone into hard-cover which the general public cannot afford. I want to say that with the "Unorthodox Engineers" stories, if I could afford it I'd issue my own paperback, but it's just not on. You've got to work through the recognised publishers, and at the moment everything is hanging on whether the Cageworld series is a success or not.

**MORGAN:** It's noticeable that a number of your novels seem to include, often as quite an important aspect, future war or the aftermath of future war. I hope you accept that as an observation. And I wonder whether this is pure coincidence or whether there's a good reason for it. Is it that you feel war is going to be an important part of any future, or is warfare perhaps a special interest of yours?

**KAPP:** It's certainly been a part of established history in the past, so I don't see why we should exclude it from the future. I hadn't realised this was such a feature of my books. But if somebody was to say to me tomorrow, "Write the story you would most like to write", then I would write snapshots from a future war. Not because I'm interested in war as such, but because I'm interested in what happens to the individuals caught up in the war - interested in what effects the war, the particular form of future warfare, is liable to have on them. Now, "Gottlos" ('Analog' Nov 1969) is a story of mine about that. And "Which way do I go for Jericho?" ('New Writings' 20) is another. There are at least three more stories I'd like to write in that vein. I went through the last war and I was very interested - I was only young at the time; it didn't affect me too greatly. I was interested in the reactions of the individuals to the mammoth destructive forces around them. Basically, as a writer, I'm interested in the individual versus the interplay of environment.

**MORGAN:** That answer really leads to the next question, which is, what are your intentions when you write science fiction? Are you just

trying to entertain the reader, or are you trying to do more than that?

KAPP: Not at all. I'm just writing things which interest me. Hopefully they will also interest other people, but if they didn't interest me I wouldn't write them in the first place. When I start out writing I never know, apart from the Cage-world series, whether the thing is going to sell or not, so you can say I'm investing four months or six months of spare time in a personal whim, writing to gratify myself. There's no more logic in it than that.

MORGAN: Have you ever considered giving up being an electronics engineer and going into full-time writing? We're back now to the economics of the market situation.

KAPP: Very much so. A few years ago I would have answered this question entirely differently, but the economics of the market are such that it would be a foolhardy thing to attempt to go into full-time writing unless you have three or four years' salary in the bank, which I do not have. I would love to go into full-time writing but I also enjoy my involvement with science and technology. I'm doing a lot of work for the Science Research Council on very sophisticated new developments concerned with body-scanning. Keeping in continued touch with developments in physics is important to me. I learn an awful lot at work. It's difficult. I would love to be able to sit down every day and write. I think if I did this I would get bored and I would get stale because I would be cut off from the constant input of new ideas.

MORGAN: Have you ever written fiction that wasn't science fiction?

KAPP: No. But the market forces are tending me to think very strongly in that direction because the sf market is so limited at the moment that I'm looking enviously at Desmond Bagley and Alistair Maclean and saying "Why don't I sit down and write a best-seller instead of hacking our this sf stuff?"

MORGAN: Have you ever used a pseudonym for any of your sf?

KAPP: I have but it didn't get published. The main reason I used it was because I was trying to get a snide little story past Mike Moorcock while he was editing 'New Worlds', and it didn't come off. I don't know if he saw through the ruse or if he just didn't like the story. It might be interesting to mention that the name was "Bruno Dry". Bruno was a great friend of mine and I was feeling very dry when I wrote the story.

MORGAN: It sounds like an early Lionel Fanthorpe pseudonym, doesn't it? It's noticeable that your Looks have been published first of all by Corgi, The Dark Mind, then several by Panther, and now by New English Library. We know NEL approached you, but does this change of publishers suggest that you've had bad experiences with publishers, which have caused you to move on?

KAPP: I don't know. I remember once when a publisher - I won't say which one - lost a manuscript. I sent off a book to them and they received it, but they managed to lose it and asked me for another copy, which I had to type out specially. Then later, when I saw the proofs, I noticed a particular spelling mistake which I knew had only been in the first copy I sent them. Then there's one novel which I sold to Dobson, and which they even paid to have set in type, but which has never appeared. And there's nothing that I or my agent could do about it; it's trapped in a kind of limbo. That's one called The Timewinders. But even so this is a changing market, and I don't think you should read too much significance into changes of publisher.

MORGAN: Which of your novels has given you the most satisfaction?

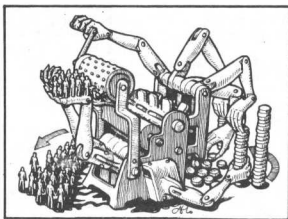
KAPP: Oh, The Wizard of Anharitte, without a doubt. Because it's adventure, because I love the characters, because I've always had an ambition to write about the city and I achieved this... ■

Into The Arena

HYPE

HYPE

HOORAH!



ROBERT  
SILVERBERG  
LORD  
VALENTINE'S  
CASTLE

In a recent issue of 'Vector' my eye was caught by a handsome full-page advertisement by Pan Books for Lord Valentine's Castle.

How pleasant, in these straitened days, that a publisher is paying for a full page in 'Vector'! One's joy turns to ashes, though, when one learns that Pan Books were spending the majority of their SF advertising budget on promoting this one book. And very little on promoting anybody else.

In a way, this ad is a collector's item. After explaining that Bob Silverberg has made a fortune from writing, and how a frantic publishers' auction took place as soon as he had scribbled the idea for this book on the back of an envelope, and how the opening sentence subsequently came to him like the lines of Kubla Khan to Coleridge -- lucky for him that California is far from Porlock! -- the ad then presents some quotes hailing this book as a magnificent Behemoth, et cetera. (Funnily, this particular quote is from the supposedly left wing Labour Party newspaper Tribune, who regularly leave their political acumen at home whenever it comes to reviewing SF; Lord Valentine's Castle, of course, is a book in praise of the Divine Right of Kings.)

Yes indeed, it is the Day of the Behemoth -- and the lesser animals get trampled.

And it is the day of hype...which can indeed be hilariously funny, if one has a black sense of comedy.

Essential to the best grand hype is an array of ecstatic pre-publication quotes from one's authorial peers, destined for the cover of the brand new book; and thus publishers are currently turning authors -- whose speciality is supposed to be freshness, sincerity and originality in thought and utterance -- into a new breed of hectic copywriters, determined to persuade you, with glowing fervour, that this book washes whiter.

At which point I might toss out a proposal for the Non-Book of the Year: namely, The Book of Hype, which will gather within its pages all the best examples of this species from the book covers of the last five years. There will also be a Do-It-Yourself section, with multiple choice lists of suitable syntactic structures, comparisons and superlatives -- to save authors some trouble, yet not to offend the publishers who may also issue their own books, or may do so in future. Really, this proposal should save authors quite a bit of time, and rescue them from being forced to think like copywriters every few weeks; and probably no one would notice the difference.

This could even become something of a game, instead of what it is now becoming: an embarrassment, and a periodic degradation of a creative artist's brain. (In the good old days, this is what critics were for.) 'Hey, how did you rate Fred's new book?' 'Gee, I tossed the dice and came up with a sixteen, an eighty-four and seventy-niner.' Those possessing word processors could simply slot in a tape of The Book of Hype with instructions to print out a randomised letter of appreciation.

For it is getting embarrassing, as one's author-peers grope for new and decorative, heartfelt metaphors and similes to describe the overwhelming readerly experience they have just undergone, staying up two nights running to finish the book, shocked and exalted, slaving with frustrated appetite for the sequel.

Pocket/Timescape did all authors in this fix a service recently, and laid a foundation stone for The Book of Hype by distributing The Pocket Fanzine with a range of exemplar letters from authors in it, which I cannot, alas, quote "in whole or in part in any form." I think I might mention, however, that statistically the lead metaphor seems to be shaping up as that of a tapestry -- lots of gleaming threads, pulled tight...

Actually, it is getting difficult to come up with fresh metaphors for science-fictional achievements -- and for the field itself; as I realized in the bar at a recent convention, faced -- just five minutes away -- by a panel discussion boldly entitled 'The Edges of SF', and wondering what on earth these were. Joe Nicholas, newly returned from Australia, happened to mention that the population level down under is pegged by the limited availability of fresh water. (Or was it the amount of beer they could brew?) Whereupon I remembered the old

Rand Corporation plan, now funded by the Saudis, for towing Antarctic icebergs northwards; and the image sprang forth, fully formed, of genre-SF as a great big iceberg carved from the Gernsback Glacier being towed through the equatorial mainstream, and melting at the edges...

Yet this metaphor was quite overtaken by another panelist who proposed that in a couple of hundred years time, or less, the immortal science-fictioneers of today, playing variations upon their song-book of themes, may well be regarded as exactly akin to medieval French court poets, and will attract as much attention as those poets do today -- for the book itself will be obsolete.

In the Darwinian struggle for survival of this panel, the emblem of medieval court poetry quite trounced that of the melting iceberg -- though I still retain a soft spot for the latter... At a subsequent convention, once more hunting for the elusive Snark of an appropriate metaphor -- in this case for the nomination-worthy, Best Anthology-worthy, consensus type of short story -- I stumbled upon Jellied Pig's Head. (For Günter Grass wrote a witty and grotesque poem of this title which while nominally a sleeves-rolled-up-to-the-elbows paean to Grass's beloved art of cookery, is also a fine biting satire on the recipe for writing a politically correct poem.)

In these circumstances, and notwithstanding the ruthless Darwinian combat of new metaphors -- tapestries wrapping up icebergs, as in the game of Stone, Scissors, Paper; with medieval court poets leaping aboard, to be drowned in a pan of simmering pig's head; now a parable takes shape to round off this first column. For new Behemoths are rearing up on the horizon, while the banners of hype unfurl.

Lo, here comes Majipoor 2 -- and how can we possibly wait, cries an anguishedly hyping authoress, for the second volume of The Saga of Pliocene Exile? And now it transpires that The Snow Queen is actually part of a trilogy. And, et cetera...

Let us entitle this parable:

### Of Ground, and Ocean, and Sky

Ocean, Ground and Sky met together one day, to discuss the recent upheavals.

"New masterpieces are arising all along the boundaries of the old," declared Ground, shaking with anticipation. "Other books are going under. We three should get up an expedition to be present at the eruption of the next new work."

"Shall we take gifts with us?" asked Sky. "Such as gold, and incense -- that sort of thing?"

Ocean shook his wavy head.

"No, I imagine there'll be plenty of gold and incense."

"We ought to take something, though -- if only as a peace offering," said Sky. "There are such grindings and rumblings when a new fiction bursts forth. All the fault lines of the other writers tremble."

"When the engine of the imagination turns over," observed Ground, "there is always much screeching and vibration. Yet without this disturbance there would be no fresh deposits of the imaginary on the planet's

surface. The older peaks would wear down after a while. Everything would go flat."

"Will this new arrival be a novel?" asked Sky innocently.

Ground did his best to explain to her.

"It isn't as cut and dried as that, my dear Sky. Novel, novella, novelette, short story -- the one category thrusts up into the next by a natural process of evolution. The Himalaya of the novel, with its sparkling crown of lucite, grows up almost of its own accord out of the foothill of the novelette -- quite rapidly, too, in some cases. I imagine we will see a novelette born, or even a short story. But this will grow and grow, volcanically, with much steam and smoke, within a few weeks."

Ground hesitated.

"And yet?" prompted Sky:

"And yet it may be a whole novel all at once -- or even the Pellon piled on Ossa, of a trilogy. A whole range of mountains may emerge instantly from underground."

"What shape will it take?" asked Sky.

She was busily sculpting her clouds into castles.

Ground pondered for a while.

"It will be full of strata of relationships. These will fold over and under each other, cunningly."

"And what will the scenery be like?"

"Ah, there will be plenty of surface beauty for your eye. There will be exciting gorges and pitfalls, too. Adventurous crevasses and ledges to cling to. And perhaps some long meanders. Yet the folds underneath will change the meaning of what lies on the surface -- for those who look beneath the surface. Though, for those who don't look too deeply, the surface will be colourful enough."

A gale of petulance blew down from Sky.

"It isn't my fault that I can't see all the complicated folds under the surface!"

"Ah, but in this case everybody will want it to be known that they have seen beneath the surface. So there will be a convenient network of caves, with an easily navigable subterranean river."

"Excellent," said Ocean. "The story will flow easily, then."

"This won't be too dense a product of the Imagination," continued Ground.

"Massive, but not dense. Rule One of Tectonic Success: he that rises to the surface must be twenty-five per cent lighter than the others."

"When shall we set out?" asked Sky, excitedly. Her hair blew out in long streamers.

"Right now," said Ground. And slowly he revolved himself on his axis, to bring himself closer to the source of the new eruption.

Ocean launched himself along a powerful current.

Sky blew in the appropriate direction.

The three friends passed by a number of older mountains, still massive, though now gone cold inside. They also passed an aborted volcano, whose initial gush of lava had solidified in its throat after the first eruption -- though substantial puffs of steam still issued from vents around its sides. And they passed many hills and lesser mountains, still actively thrusting themselves upwards -- though

already these were being jostled by the new disturbance.

"There! I can see it!" called out Sky -- since she could see further than Ocean or Ground, although Ground felt all the deep vibrations. "The earth's splitting open!"

Ground groaned in sympathy.

And from out of the hot bowels of the imagination there flowed a new hill. The surrounding hills and mountains all nodded to it, since it most definitely broke new ground. It expanded their territory.

"It's a novelette," said Ocean.

"Wait," cautioned Ground. "It's still growing. It's going to be a novel."

Presently, Sky brushed across the new peak.

"Why, it's a hundred thousand words high already! A moment ago it was only ten."

Ocean reared up on a high wave.

"Fine exciting terrain, there."

"Good deep caves beneath," commented Ground. "Simple but convincing. Only a few of them are empty air pockets."

"It's... stopped."

"No, it hasn't -- there's a sequel!"

Beside the first mountain there rapidly arose an even higher peak.

"Two hundred thousand words high, that one," marvelled Sky. She was quite out of breath at its height.

"But it's the same shape as the first one," objected Ocean. "It's just bigger, that's all."

"Going for the trilogy, now!" shouted Ground.

The third and highest mountain roared up and up, till it reached the very fringes of space. And this mountain looked quite different at first glance, but actually it was a mirror image of the second mountain.

Nevertheless, incense arose from fumaroles all around, and a rain of gold filled a hollow between the two latest peaks, brimful.

But even as Ocean and Sky were politely applauding the new trilogy, Ground cried out. More seismic shocks had reached him.

"Another eruption? So soon? Surely the engine of the imagination will seize up with the heat!"

Even so, another eruption was already taking place, not far away.

Another novelette appeared from nowhere and swiftly swelled into a novel of splendid girth, shouldering the new trilogy range aside.

Ground sensed disaster. Just in time he warned Ocean and Sky.

And a few moments later the whole crust of the world lifted off its roots, turned over and thumped back down again. Young mountains, foothills and even mature ranges tumbled. Catastrophic oscillations shook the land. Before very long, there was only

one vast plain of debris.

Sky loomed over this flattened plain, searching in vain for signs of activity. Ground settled himself beneath it, patiently to await the advent of some future geological epoch. And Ocean flowed away. He felt bitterly cold. For a long time there was an Ice age.

IAN WATSON © 1982

Editorial Continued.

to escape. We read to fulfil desires, fulfil dreams, and acquire experiences that are outside our grasp. For which, I see no apology is needed, life is about modes of experience. It is, however, more difficult to find one novel that characterises this factor in my reason for reading science fiction. If I give you a spread it might help. Pohl's Gateway, but not its sequel, Molly Zero by Keith Roberts and Richard Cowper's Road to Corlay spring to mind. These novels are not sterile concepts which I can appreciate for their aesthetic beauty, but rather they affect me, they alter my perspective. They are the type of novel that frighten the hell out of me - I approach them with trepidation as I am scared of what they might make me feel, how they might affect my reality.

(As an aside may I ask you a question? With reality encroaching upon you in the guise of the tragic war we have in the Falklands islands has it affected your reading? Do you feel that one is reluctant to approach fantasy when the experience of reality is all too real? I must admit, however, that the reality of the Falklands does seem like fantasy.)

Let's now return to Guilt. I've left it to last as it confuses me. On the roller-skating rink the people felt guilty because they were revelling in someone else's misery. Does this work in science fiction? Do we read it because we enjoy the experiences of life from afar only? Reluctantly, I feel that this is most probably true. In Gateway, Rob Broadhead goes through

experiences which I would not be capable of accepting. In Molly Zero, Molly has experiences and feelings which are probably beyond my capability and definitely beyond my wishes! I feel guilty because I am accepting a reality which can only pain me as far as I wish it to. I can hide between the covers.

Aldiss's comments do relate to me, the glove fits, but am I bending my interpretation of what science fiction is about? Are curiosity, guilt and the brevity of life factors that specially relate to science fiction readers and writers only? These are questions which I hope you will help me answer.

SPACE '82

An exciting new type of event will be held by the British Interplanetary Society on 12-14 November 1982 at the new purpose-built Brighton Conference Centre.

Space '82 will bring together Members and leading figures from the Space World in a weekend of talks, displays and informal meetings.

Speakers such as Tom Paine (ex-NASA Administrator) will look ahead to the coming decades in space, covering Solar Power Satellites, Exploration of the Solar System and Space Industrialisation, among many topics.

Other leading Space personalities will be announced as our programme develops.

Details of Space '82, and membership of the BIS, are available from: The Executive Secretary, British Interplanetary Society, 27-29 South Lambeth Road, London SW8 1SZ





CHOP.CHOP.CHOP....

RAY OWEN



(THE MANY-COLOURED LAND by JULIAN MAY. Pan 1982, 411pp., £1.75. )

No matter how much a reviewer may oppose being totally negative about a book, there is always the possibility that he will someday come across a book so extremely distasteful to him that he will be unable to say anything remotely positive about it. Such a book is The Many Coloured Land, which I not only dislike but consider as symbolic of everything that is wrong with the writing and publishing of modern fiction and in particular with that area labelled as "science fiction".

The first volume in the Saga of the Exiles, "will eventually rival The Lord Of The Rings, The Foundation Trilogy and The Lensman Series", according to a critic for "Science Fiction Review", quoted on both the front and back covers. Other rave comments come from Zelazny, Leiber and McIntyre, which is rather surprising as few professional authors would care to be connected with such overkill publicity. For, at heart, the book is nothing more than a poorly constructed collection of plot clichés erected around a framework of ideas - like time travel, telepathy and alien invasion - which were hacked to death long before Frodo reached Bree. A story built upon such 'established' themes can be of value if the author is exploring new aspects, as Ian Watson did in "The Very Slow Time Machine", but, unfortunately, May simply provides us with a completely unoriginal piece of pulp writing.

Julian May is hardly a well-known author (or, rather authoress, for I am told she is female, although the biographical note conceals this), and as this would seem to be her first major work some leniency is perhaps called for in its dissection. Yet Pan are clearly claiming it (at enormous expense in publicity) as a modern sf classic, so it has to be examined as a serious literary work.

The story deals with a group of voluntary exiles who decide to take a path followed by many others: a one-way journey back into the Pliocene Epoch. Upon arrival there, they discover that the world is under the control of an alien race of telepaths, the Tanu, who have subjugated mankind and use the women for breeding (what else!): the 'heroes' of our story decide to change all this. This takes up the first two-thirds of the book, the last section dealing with the growth and activities of a resistance movement using another set of aliens, who are only galvanised into action by the steely-eyed, determined humans. This is not the plot of a literary classic; its values must, therefore, surely lie in the depth of its execution and in May's writing skills.

But, in terms of theme, the treatment of the very important issue of mankind's freedom is dabbled with in no greater depth than a Dick Barton story. The characterisation is embarrassing: in the very worst traditions of space opera. The randomly-mixed group of exiles have between them all the skills necessary to cope with every situation - the Amazon to fight, the Nun to heal, the Spacer to navigate and fly, the Palaeontologist who is of course an expert in Pliocene geography, not to mention assorted beserkers, telepaths and roguish thieves. Despite chapters dealing with the backgrounds of each character, so poor is May's depiction of them that the reader rapidly forgets who is who, and cannot link the names to the relevant stereotype.

The book is a stylistic disaster, too. There are certain minimum standards of writing below which a major publisher like Pan will not fall; but this book is perilously close to the border. Its tone is flat, unelaborate, and drags for the entire 411 pages. Take, for example, our first view of Pliocene civilisation:

"As the anthropologist's mind cleared, he was excited to see a stone fortress of considerable size perched on the eminence, facing east. It

did not resemble the fairytale chateaux of France, but rather the simpler castles of his English homeland. Except for the absence of a moat, it was something like Bodiam in Sussex. When they came closer, Bryan saw that there was an outer ringwall of rough masonry about twice the height of a man. Inside this, beyond an encircling space that formed an outer ward, was a four-sided bailey, a hollow square without a central keep, with towers at the corners and a great barbican at the entrance. Above the gate was the effigy of a bearded human face, crafted in yellow metal. When they came close to the outer wall, Bryan heard an eerie howling."

The whole novel is related in this pedestrian manner, but this passage is interesting as it shows some of May's major problems of style and creativity. This lack of creativity is demonstrated by the dull description of the castle, which appears to have been copied from an illustrated children's book. Poor descriptive power is evidenced by "a stone fortress of considerable size", where the pale and wooly adjectival phrase could have been easily replaced by an effective adjective. The only real imaginative or subjective descriptions - "fairy-tale chateaux", "eerie howling" - are merely clichés.

It seems safe to assume that we are not dealing with a literary classic after all. Perhaps we should treat it as a simple adventure story, for a good action piece can often be entertaining: but, even as such, the book fails. We have already seen how May's problem lies mainly in being unoriginal, and as adventure it is again lacking in innovation, loaded with ingredients that are already very familiar to readers of SF and fantasy. There is first a 'wagon train' crossing the continent, embarrassing in its similarity to Edgar Rice Burroughs's first John Carter story. After a brief battle, our 'heroes' set off on a Tolkienian quest and, having found a chink in the armour of the invulnerable oppressors, join a resistance movement and launch a last-ditch effort to overthrow the tyrants; the only things missing are a John Williams sound-track and Alec Guinness in the role of the heroes' mentor. (This is not to point out how plagiaristic the book is, but to demonstrate its unoriginality.) Perhaps the worst condemnation, for an adventure story, is that it became something of a chore to finish.

The Many-Coloured Land is one of the few books to have made me feel genuinely angry. It is not specifically Julian May's work that causes this (books just as uninteresting and as derivative have been published many times before), but the attitude of the publishers, Pan. If we were to remove the book's SF trappings, we would be left with a very ordinary tale - or, rather, we wouldn't, because Pan would have realised that such a work, lacking in all redeeming literary values, would not sell and would have rejected the manuscript. But as the book is directed at 'mindless' SF readers, they clearly feel that any subliterate drivel will do, and if it's long then it must be a classic. Add massive sales hype, and commercial success is almost guaranteed; but this time, they deserve to be stung, and stung hard, by people refusing to buy the thing. Perhaps then they'd realise that attitudes to fiction in general and science fiction in particular need to be extensively rethought.



TICHY TALES

IAN WATSON



(MORTAL ENGINES by STANISLAW LEM. Avon/Bard 1982, 239pp., \$2.95. )

As Lem himself wrote of this book, in 'Foundation' 15, "Tak wiec Bajki Robotow byly treniengiem, rusztowaniem i wstepem do napisania Cyberiady." (English translation available from the Back Issues Dept., Science Fiction Foundation for a mere £2.)

I must confess myself a semi-admirer of Lem. That's to say, some of his works I adore: such as Solaris and The Invincible and The Cyberiad and The Star Diaries - and some of them I can't get on with at all: such as Memoirs Found in a Bathtub, The Investigation or Tales of Pirx the Pilot. So it was with joy abounding that I approached Mortal Engines, this "training ground and introduction to The Cyberiad." (Oops, done it again - as Pirx would say - there go dozens of back issue sales.) And the joy was amply fulfilled for 137 out of the 239 pages, containing as these do glitteringly witty robot fairy-tales of the Cyberiad cycle.

But here arises the tiny problem of Lemian cycles and epicycles, for Lem does not always just write a book and finish it, then perhaps write a sequel to it; rather, the robot tales and Tichy tales and Pirx tales tend to continue amassing and developing over the years, accreting and spinning off, unto ultimately vast proportions, from which a translator will inevitably compile and select - as Michael Kandel has done here.

Kandel's services to literature in his many Lem translations definitely deserve some sort of beatification. Heaven knows what the original text is in Polish, but here is the English. (We are in a robot lunatic asylum.)

'Among the maniacs things were more cheerful, a group of them sat by iron beds, playing on the springs like harps and singing in chorus: "We ain't got no ma or pa, 'cause we is au-tom-a-ta," also "Ro, ro, ro your bot, gently down the stream." ' And so forth.

Apart from a certain looseness in the punctuation, which may not be Kandel's responsibility, well, I believe him. But how can that be in the Polish? But it reads as though it ought to be, so right is it in spirit!

Anyway, Kandel has translated these tales in highly spirited vein, and lovely they are indeed - philosophical, nutty, colourful, full of high jinks, desperate ploys and counterploys and come-uppances, composing a fairyland universe of cyberknights and electropersons, to which is counterpointed, dimin-uendo, the occasional slimely doings of, ugh, biological wet-life, Man, with his oozing jelly eyes and rust-producing ichor in his mouth. (There is, to my mind, an genuine quiet strand of misanthropy running through all this - though of course the joke does require this to be the case.)

On to this glorious bundle Kandel (who also provides a worthy, if slightly dogged, introduction about our attitude to machines and artificial life) has tacked a very long tale of Pirx hunting a beserking robot on the Moon. Pirx is in serious vein here, by and large, and there is a dark and brooding moral to the tale; but frankly I find it a hard and pedestrian slog. And the final long story of the book, "The Mask," is another hard slog by the wayside of which I soon fell. So, all in all, I found the first three-fifths of the book a joy and a delight; and the other two-fifths a grind. But no doubt this is an acceptable proportion of joy to grind, when you can easily pick up story collections by other hands wherein only the first and last tales are any good, and the rest is stuffing.

~~~~~

SOLE CATCHER

JOHN HOBSON

~~~~~

(WINDHAVEN by GEORGE R.R. MARTIN & LISA TUTTLE. NEL 1982., 315pp., £1.50. )

The fear of the unknown is a basic constituent of the human psyche and through the entire course of human history, in particular since the French Revolution, there have been confrontations between conservatism and change. Perhaps surprisingly, this basic aspect of the historical process has been ignored by a large number of SF writers, who seem content to wallow in feudalistic (Dune), liber-

tarian (Anderson) or cosy British democratic (Wyndham) assumptions without recognising the perpetual change that runs through, and is inherent in, all societies. Windhaven, therefore, is both a surprise and a revelation, because it is in fact an examination of the process of change. It is not, however, a dry polemic: read a few pages and the effect is like a verbal narcotic - one is hooked, forced to devour as quickly as the pages can be turned. It is that rarity, an intelligent "good read".

The story is constructed around two previous published (in 'Analog', surprisingly enough) shorter works, a device not calculated to result in a flowing narrative, but since the novel recounts a number of incidents in the life of Maris, from her early childhood to her death, its episodic nature turns out to be very beneficial.

Maris is born of poor fisherfolk stock on the windswept world of Windhaven, a planet mostly covered by ocean save for a few clusters of Shetland-type islands settled by the survivors of a space ark that crashed there in the distant past. To sail the seas is dangerous, and communications are more easily maintained by sailing the winds in hang-gliders fabricated from the remains of the spaceship - the planet has few natural resources of its own. By the time of Maris's birth, the islands have established strong and independent identities and are linked by the "Flyers", descendants of the original fabricators of the wings who have organised themselves into a feudalistic guild which observes a benevolent if condescending attitude towards the "landbound" and maintains a strict code of conduct, in particular the passing down of the wings to their children by the laws of primogeniture alone.

The authors, having skillfully realised a society which is stable yet conservative and faintly reactionary, introduce Maris as the harbinger of change. Like all small children, she wants to be a Flyer, yet her birthright condemns her to become a beachcomber; then, by chance, she is adopted by a childless Flyer who trains her as his successor only for his wife to produce an heir who must ultimately inherit the wings. Maris is a natural flyer, her step-brother a natural singer (in a world without paper, the balladeer is both the record and the recorder of life); both are to be forced into careers neither wishes to pursue. In despair, Maris steals the wings and precipitates a crisis that can only be resolved by the calling of a Flyers' council. Rationality wins the day: Maris retains her wings because it is illogical to give them to someone who has no interest in them. In so doing, the council agree that primogeniture should no longer be the sole determinant for the holding of wings but that all children should be given the opportunity to challenge for them; to this end, academies are set up to train the landbound and annual flying competitions inaugurated. This change of heart is not without real precedent: in France on the night of 4 August 1789, for instance, the Estates General, comprised of aristocrats, surrendered their feudal privileges in the hope that they would thereby stave off the Revolution. They didn't, of course, but their intent was similar to that of the Flyers: give token freedoms but retain the real power. Thus, as the first students of the academies fail to win wings, the academies begin to be closed, strengthening the Flyers' belief in their "right" to retain the wings - ignoring the fact that they can give their children personalised training while the academies have many students but few pairs of wings. This Maris opposes but can do nothing about until she meets Val who, although she may have begun the revolution, is its catalyst - he has a grudge against the aristocracy of the air thanks to his having once been a servant of one of the Flyers, and simply refuses to acknowledge the codes they hold so dear. The odium he attracts at first blinds Maris to his true abilities as a Flyer - but it is through him that she comes to realise that, for all her attempts to make herself acceptable to the Flyers, she in fact remains an outsider regarded with tolerance rather than respect. The annual flying contest is thus more than just an absorbing and entertaining set-piece, but concerns Maris's dawning realisation that the revolution she began is now firmly under way and that the break with the past is irrevocable because certainty and social rigidity have been replaced with freedom and anarchy. The final section

of the book explores this unravelling of the code of social behaviour.

Windhaven is a perfect example of an absorbing and entertaining book with a strong undercurrent of ideas. The characters, in particular Maris, are well drawn - her love affair when middle-aged is depicted with a genuine compassion that is refreshing when compared to both the sickly sentimentality and the debased sensationalism of sex all too common in SF. And, although collaborative works are often cursed with an uncertain style because of the compromises writers make when working together, the joins in this book don't show at all - rarely, since the days of Kornbluth and Pohl, can a partnership have been as successful. The opening and closing sections in particular are pieces of fine, lyrical craftsmanship.

Windhaven is very much in the tradition of H.G. Wells because it examines the current debates of our age - in this case, the conflicts between the classes in society - from that exclusively SF perspective which allows both writers and readers to look at the world from a detached viewpoint, yet it is told in such a spirited manner that it can also be read and enjoyed as a piece of pure escapism. Either way, Martin and Tuttle have produced a work of true maturity.



## DAGGER AND SIMPER

CHERRY WILDER



(LADY OF THE HAVEN/THE BEASTS OF HADES/SAMARKAND DAWN by GRAHAM DIAMOND. Play- )  
(boy Press 1978/81/80, 195/225., \$1.95/2.25. )

I have been poring over these books for far too long trying to work out exactly why I find them so bad. The Haven series consists of four books so far; here we have the second and the fourth. Lady of the Heaven is written in a strange mixture of styles ranging through the author's attempts at 'dignified descriptive', 'saga-cum-jungle-book', even bluff sea-faring carry on and a touch of sub-Burroughs barbaric.

The first false note is struck for me in the brief opening chapter which fills us in on the primeval forest and its Dwellers, particularly the wolves, under the benign rule of the Goddess Fara. This saga was told to the narrator or author by a proud and noble wolf called Cicero. We have had a signpost that this is a post-holocaust world...mighty empires have risen and fallen...and in this world of primeval forest and outposts of civilisation, well, there are wolves and other Dwellers in the forest with Roman and Greek names.

The talking animals with whom I remain most completely in sympathy were created by Rudyard Kipling and A.A. Milne. I had reservations about The Wind in the Willows, did not care for Dr Doolittle and, sometime later, was not really grabbed by Watership Down. Even my marginally classical education (in the distant outpost of a once mighty Empire) has produced a sharp distaste for talking wolves called Cicero, Hector, Athena, Casca, Portia etc. In the other Haven book, The Beasts of Hades there is a talking rabbit named Cinna and I found myself imagining a scene in which he is mistaken for a wolf of the same name and is dragged off squealing "I am Cinna the Rabbit! I am Cinna the Rabbit!"

The wolves converse in a canine tongue and the heroine, a high-born lady of the current Empire, centred upon the Haven, has been raised among wolves and can growl away with the best of them. She can also speak jackal and hyena. The heroine is called Stacy, short for Anastasia, rather in the way that Prince Valiant is commonly called Val by his close associates. It makes a character more cosy and believable if she has an easy everyday name.

The problem of naming is bound up with the problem of style: the names are chosen from an immense grab-bag of all the names in the world including all those the author can make up. The forest names for the Goddess and such things as Aleya, the wind, Balaka, the stars, do not jar so much as the Graeco-Roman wolves. The

humans have straight names with a touch of saga, thus we get Nigel, Desmond (called Des), Olaf, Gwen, Trevor, Edric, Alryc, Elias, Lorna.

The normal give and take between humans is as twitchy and light-weight as the heroine's reactions. She tends to wince, to widen her eyes. The Empire of the Haven has existed for two thousand years but it is remarkably non-specific. There is no sense of place, nor of hierarchy. Stacy hears from the Old One, an ancient non-Roman wolf, of another civilisation Beyond the Sea. She persuades her father Nigel to allow her to travel to Rhonnda, a city by the sea, and take an expedition of hardy river-boat sailors to find this other lot. They take along local wolves to make contact with the white wolves over yonder.

The journey to Rhonnda is enlivened by pirates and following the wolf-saga passages and the prosy 'Father, our land is poor in metals...we need to reach out and trade' section, we are now treated to "Full sail across the Kilkiddy, Mr Boniface! Trim 'er for the channel..." "Aye Capt'n, full sail it is!" The editors have something to do with irritations like 'Capt'n'. Even in New York the word Captain is surely pronounced 'Cap'n'. The text is also peppered with scraps of modern slang, perhaps to reassure the reader that the real world is not far away.

The story is so far not particularly violent and could not be called sword and sorcery...more like dagger and simper. The lack of any coherent style makes the book soft as well as imprecise. Stacy is oddly schoolgirlish.

'Here...she had made some of the closest friendships she had ever known. Real friends, such as blue-eyed Sandra, the calm and level-headed captain of the women Rangers, and sensitive Robin, with yellow hair and an enchanting smile. But most of all she thought of Heather and Melinda. In the dank depths of the tiny cabins they bared the secrets of their lives, exchanged hopes and dreams and shared whispered romance.'

In spite of passages like this the explorers cross the ocean without undue nausea, guided by a whale which they call Salome. On the other side they encounter many hardships including the attacks of morlockian creatures 'half-human, half-baboon', which they call things. These things and the barbarian Nomads are engaged in Ritual Wars with other humans who live in fortress cities. Stacy and her companions assist in the defeat of things and Nomads. There is an action-packed finale. ('"Anastasia!" he gasped, "It can't be! But it is!"...Tears streamed down Melinda's face, tears of joy. "You did it Stacy," she whispered. "You really did it!"') Stacy, now mystically advanced to Empire Princess, sails home with her sea-captain boyfriend Elias.

The Haven, the first volume of the series, recorded a threatened invasion of the human outposts by savage dogs and vampire bats. The fourth volume, The Beasts of Hades, deals with a threatened invasion of the Forest by assorted things from the underground world called Hades. The author is becoming more experienced, more fluent,

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and noticeably more bloodthirsty, while retaining many of his idiosyncratic touches. There is a caveman called Grunt and a trio of hawks called Athos, D'tagnon and Maori. Staggered by this combination I wondered where Diamond would draw the line and on what grounds. Uncas, Chingachook and Viking, Robin Hood, Little John and Cherokee, Holmes, Watson and Hottentot....

The author has been highly praised by Andre Norton for the Haven series; he turns out the books steadily and they probably sell very well. But something new has been added; success has spoiled Graham Diamond. His other series centres on a fantasy Samarkand, full of Arabian Nights nonsense. (Come, O wearied traveler, hear and believe of the golden age of Samarkand) Unfortunately, as a wearied traveler through these books I can't 'believe of' a word of them. I have only the second Samarkand volume to hand, thank goodness, and it is of a nastiness that makes one hanker for the clean, dumb, badly-written boring rubbish of the Haven books, for the wolves and the rabbits.

*Samarkand Dawn* ("A fantasy novel of calculated and bloody revenge") is sado-masochistic soft porn; it is a welter of blood and other bodily secretions. The readers who really enjoy or are turned on by this book can evoke only a puzzled compassion. The heroines, who take an active part in the belly-dancing and blood spilling, are named Sharon and Carolyn: nice ordinary girl-next-door names.



LASSIE COME HOME

BRIAN SMITH



(A BETTER MANTRAP by BOB SHAW. Gollancz 1982, 192pp., £6.95. )

'Nine science fiction and fantasy stories', proclaims the dust-jacket blurb. More precisely, there are six SF stories, two fantasies and one sitting neatly on the fence. The distinction is important, for it represents a clear dichotomy in style and texture.

The fantasies are the playground in which Shaw unleashes his formidable talent for comedy, to very good effect. "The Kingdom of O'Ryan" details the efforts of two con-men to make a fortune from racing tips, slightly hampered by the presence of a cousin who believes himself to be in contact with beings from Betelgeuse. "The Cottage of Eternity" explains away just about every supernatural phenomenon there is in terms of some particle physics that is at one and the same time both distressingly convincing and obviously tongue-in-cheek, a feat not so much like walking a tightrope as walking the Planck. (It is also liberally strewn with in-jokes and I'm sure you would all be horrified to learn just how low a status SF fans enjoy in the afterlife.) Both stories are richly comic, reminiscent of Cyril Kornbluth's work.

The SF stories are, for the most part, a sorry lot by comparison. Many years ago, I read a 'Fantasy and SF' anthology, edited by Robert P. Mills, containing a poem which railed against stories "whose setting might as well have been/the Bronx, Montmartre or Bethnal Green"; never have I encountered such persuasive evidence in favour of that sentiment. The major exception is "Frost Animals", the longest story in the book and by far the best, in which a returning starship officer finds himself accused of a murder committed just before he left Earth, eighteen years previously. The true SF detective story, whose SF content is integral to the story rather than a mere cosmetic detail, is a fiendishly difficult thing to do well but Shaw provides a convincing solution and sufficient clues by which to arrive at it.

Electing a second best SF story would be a futile exercise, as little honour would be conferred. There are two further stories which could not function other than as SF: "Conversion", a middlingly suspenseful story of a killer alien

at large in an oil well, and "In the Hereafter Hilton", which is not really a story at all, but a throwaway idea disguised as one. The remainder of the collection reworks old mainstream plots and themes, some of them of stupefying antiquity. The best of this bunch is probably "Small World"; a straightforward story of a gang of boys (living on a space colony) and their initiation ceremony, it has some good technical detail and a nicely ironic subplot, but is really made by the sudden realisation at the end of what the 'run across the sky' actually is. "Ampitheatre" is about greed and obsession in a naturalist trying to film an alien life-form; change the setting to Earth, substitute a terrestrial life-form, and the story would proceed without a hiccup. And, to finish, two of the hoariest plots ever to have escaped from a low-budget screenplay: "Dream Fighter" is really the one about the over-the-hill boxer going for one last fight against the kid who'll be a title contender next year. You know - his manager takes a bribe to make sure he takes a dive in the second round, and then...ah, you've remembered. And I can think of no greater condemnation of "Crossing the Line" than to say that, shorn of its SF content, it might well end up on The Wonderful World of Disney. It's all about a little boy on a frontier world who comes to love his robot dog, and has to face losing it when Daddy gets a promotion off-world. It has goodies to cheer, baddies to hiss, and if it ever gets as far as Hollywood I wish it known that I thought of the title Lassie Establishes Synchronous Orbit first.

The most positive thing that I can say about two-thirds of the stories in this book is that they are compact, tightly (sometimes too tightly) written, are unerringly paced, and have characters who almost ring true. "Workmanlike" is probably the word which best sums them up - but the finest workmanship cannot conceal a basic paucity of ideas. Lacking them, this collection will share the fate of most if its constituent parts - it might well be readable, it might well be entertaining for the time it takes to read it, but it will fade and be forgotten in very short order indeed.

RALPH 124C41+

DAVID LANGFORD

(THE HOME COMPUTER HANDBOOK by FRANK HERBERT (WITH MAX BARNARD). Gollancz 1981, 279pp., £7.95.)

The aim of this book is to take computer virgins by the hand and gently lead them towards a happy consummation - first dispelling all those fears of naughty interfacing implanted by folklore, then advising on the ideal choice of partner, and finally blossoming into examples of the Joy of Programming. It's not only my metaphor which seems dubious here; as with other forms of fun, there is no substitute for "hands-on" experience of manipulating computers. Even if the book achieved all its aims, the only way to get full satisfaction would be to read until halfway down page 131; then rush out and buy a computer, having learnt how to choose one; and carry on with the next paragraph, which begins by telling you how to unwrap it.

I don't recommend this course of action: the book is a mess. It opens like a Dianetics text - 'You have in your hands a book that can change your life', and similar threats of instant menopause for unwary readers - and is soon babbling that symbiosis with home computers represents mankind's next evolutionary leap, and that if you don't buy one right now you're headed for the dustbin of history. There are chapters of pure Readers' Digest uplift about the wondrous computerised future, and of pure froth about terminology ("Should we call (a computer) the 'prediction machine', then? Or perhaps 'reality machine'?" The name computer, you see, "suggests mathematics too strongly".) There are masses of partially relevant





material - Babbage, calculators, attacks on logic and IQ tests, the interesting revelation that computers are in no way complicated (that's just a lie put about by elitists who want to Cover Things Up)...

(This last might explain the reaction of Martin Hoare, a computer professional whom I invited to flip through the book. "One of the worst I've ever seen," he remarked more in sorrow than anger. "It starts by assuming you know nothing about computers. Anyone who finishes it will probably be in the same position.")

Let me say very loudly that an attack on whatever mystique may surround computers is merely dishonest when, as here, it goes so far as to suggest that there are no difficulties whatever. One is reminded of Anthony Burgess, plugging *Finnegans Wake* as a fun book for all the family, made to seem difficult only by the evil activities of literary critics. The truth is that programming is in many ways like writing: anyone can soon master the computer-program equivalent of a postcard or a slushpile story, but to achieve anything worthwhile requires study, practice and patience. The large and complex programs used in commercial computers are by intention the simplest,

cheapest ways of landing large and complex problems. They are not, as implied by the authors, a vast system of obfuscation designed to keep us in the dark - any more than *The Shadow of the Torturer* represents an inefficient way of telling a story which could have been handled much better as a Ladybird book.

Essentially, the first section of the book is padding and drivel, surrounding what could have been a perfectly sensible little article setting out the familiar truths that computers are not intelligent, that anthropomorphism is a mistake, that the machine will only do what you tell it to and can never err... though the last is a half-truth at best. "All so-called 'computer errors' lead back to some human being", say the authors soothingly, leaving us to wonder who should be blamed when, as quite frequently happens, a computer memory bit is "flipped" thanks to electron showers produced by cosmic radiation. All this is written in the friendly, folksy, easy-to-understand style of authors writing down a steep slope towards an audience assumed to be moronic.

Next come "Buyer's Guide" chapters, addressing themselves to the problem of which computer to get. Apparently, the original US edition discussed specific machines, but the list was out of date before it appeared and has now been dropped altogether. Instead, there are "what to look for" suggestions, often so generalised as to be useless - many questions you're invited to ask are merely fatuous, like "Where do I install it? How do I connect it to a power source? How do I shut it down when it's not in use?" The musty air of these chapters is enhanced by stern warnings against "toy" computers without cassette/disc storage - which in today's market is like warning motorway travellers against highwaymen. Best advice in this section is to throw the book away and study computer magazines; the authors don't quite put it like that, but I do. Though mentioned in the text, an appendix listing such magazines has been sliced out to spare some Gollancz editor the hideous effort of visiting a large newsagent to jot down some

of the many British titles; but you can do this yourself. Comparisons and re-assessments of standard small machines (Tandy, Pet, Apple, etc.) and newer ones (Vic-20, BBC/Atom, etc.) are published more often than you might think. And if you find yourself unable to choose a computer without first having experience with a computer (a common problem), you could always follow the example of the BSFA. Litho Boss and try the cheap though limited Sinclair ZX-81. You'll save more than 10 percent of its cost simply by not buying The Home Computer Handbook.

The remaining half of the book is also fairly dispensable. By this time the assumption is that you own a computer - in which case you'll have acquired an operating manual specifically intended for your machine. It may not be a masterpiece of the technical writer's art (the Tandy manuals are fairly well organised, for example, while the Vic-20 one is chaotic). But it's certainly a better place to read how to turn on and try out your machine (one very generalized chapter of the book is wasted on this), to learn which of the many BASIC language dialects applies to said machine (three chapters of the book deal with a - perforce - generalized BASIC), and to find sample programs which unlike those here can be guaranteed to run on your machine without tinkering. Apart from this, much space is devoted to the glories of PROGRAMAP, a Herbert/Barnard invention which junks all those wicked, elitist, abstract, internationally agreed flow-charting symbols in favour of easy-to-draw pictures of little televisions and keyboards. "But no one flowcharts programs any more" said my bewildered computer friends. I suspect PROGRAMAP of being a crutch which will ultimately hinder learners from programming fluently.

The sample programs themselves are stupefyingly tedious and, it seems, designed to make minimum use of a computer's potential... "And here is my astonishing new Computer," cried Ralph 124C41+. "See how I encode this day's date upon the electromechanical Keyboard! Listen: even now the Computer is processing the datum! Now, upon the Cathodeicon screen - yes! The Computer's all-potent Algorithmic Program reveals that it is time to change the oil in my car's engine!" Gosh wow, as we fans say.

Mere mockery aside, I can't recommend this vacuous book to anybody.

## VECTOR'S CHOICE

MOST RIGHTEOUS BLOWS

PAUL KINCAID

(THE SWORD OF THE LICTOR by GENE WOLFE. Timescape/Sidgwick & Jackson 1982, 301pp., \$15.50/£7.95. }

A young adventurer, outcast from society, with a strange jewel that gives him extraordinary powers. He journeys through a bleak landscape encountering horrible monsters, savages, magicians, giants. His odyssey takes him to all manner of weird and wonderful places, from an old walled town to a mighty castle by way of moving islands, a jungle village and the remnants of a lost but superior civilisation. Along the way his life is under constant threat, but by his prowess, bravery, luck and the magic of the jewel he wins through.

Recognise it? It is a mish-mash of every sf cliché since Gernsback, hackneyed old plot on top of hackneyed old plot. There are bits of Homer, bits of Tolkien, and bug-eyed monsters galore. Surely no publisher today would give a second glance at such tired old stuff? Surely we are well rid of it all; it's given sf a bad enough name already, we don't want more of the same.

And yet...The author is Gene Wolfe, the novel is The Sword of the Lictor; and it is part of what is shaping up to be one of the few masterpieces of the 38.

genre. The Book of the New Sun represents sf at its best for the precise reason that Wolfe has taken sf's most outworn elements and transcended their limitations. Where it seemed that the hacks had beaten all these overused ideas into the ground, Wolfe has somehow found new life in them. Where it seemed that bug-eyed monsters and fabulous jewels and strange places and all the other wonders of sf's golden age could only be found in works of embarrassing silliness, Wolfe has somehow been able to produce a book that well repays the reading. One by one, in breathtaking succession, we are presented with plunder from the pulps; and it is fresh and exciting once more. Wolfe is an alchemist transforming dross into gold.

That is what he has done. How he has done it is a different matter. The Sword of the Lictor is perhaps the best chance we have had to assess the qualities of the series because it is a book that stands alone. Other than Severian, only four characters from the earlier volumes reappear; and so there is far less need to refer back to what has gone before. It is, therefore, easier to read than The Claw of the Conciliator, and easier to consider it on its own, without it forming part of the constant reassessment of The Book of the New Sun as a whole.

So how does Wolfe do it? In the first place, of course, we must pay tribute to the imagination of the author. To find something new in what was old, to find life in what was dead and buried, to bring it all together in a work that is constantly fresh and surprising - that is an imaginative feat that few, I think, are capable of achieving.

In addition, of course, there are the basic skills of a writer. It is, I suppose, a truism to say that a writer should create real people and believable places; yet few do so. Wolfe has not only made Severian a person we can understand and sympathise with; he has also managed to flesh out, to breathe life into the most minor of characters. And the places visited, the objects encountered, the things that happen, are all so colourfully, vividly and richly painted that they, too, are real.

These are the most basic reasons why The Book of the New Sun is so good; the qualities that would make any book a good book. There are other qualities, which help to make the series special - though to try to enumerate them would be a long and perhaps thankless task, in the long run the pleasure the books give requires no analysis. But it is perhaps worth while to draw attention to one of The Book of the New Sun's particular and distinctive qualities, and one that is for me among its chief delights: the control of language.

A writer uses language to do many jobs. First and foremost it must clearly convey the story, second it must paint a picture of the world and the people of the story. All this Wolfe does with almost negligent ease. But over and above this he exercises a control over words that raises the book to the level of art and reduces this reader to awestruck admiration. There is a clarity of expression, a rhythm of language and a precise choice of the absolutely correct word that makes the inkblots on the page all but invisible. The eye flits not across a printed page but across a screen upon which these dramas are played out. And Wolfe does more to suggest the nature of this world and its societies in the choice of one word than lesser writers could do in a page of detailed description.

The vocabulary is as weird as the world, yet we seem to comprehend its meaning more by instinct than by actually being able to define the words. There are words stolen from Latin (lictor) and from Greek (autarch), words that seem as if they should have developed from a language we know (dimarche - soldiers that 'march in twos'), and words that are totally made up (cacogen). Somehow this strange vocabulary seems to suggest both the distant future and some sort of cultural continuation. More than that, our grasp of the meaning of these words seems also to give us a grasp of the structure of the societies and the habits of thought of the people. So reality is further heightened, and our enjoyment of the book increased. Yet this requires a writing skill, and a confidence in the employment of that skill, that few authors possess. The Book of the New Sun represents a peak of achievement that, luckily for us, Gene Wolfe has dared to scale.

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