

VECTOR

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113



The Critical Journal Of The BSFA

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Dabbling Toes

the Spring Edition runs to over 760 pages from which I'm looking for about 25 books. Unavoidably, you can miss quite a few books as no description is given other than 'fiction' to a large proportion of the titles. However, here and there you do find the odd gem. I thought it might be fun, while also illuminating, to look at the books still to be published. Over the last couple of editorials the comments have been rather negative, so I will try to be positive (honest) about these books.

To start on a positive note one book that I'm looking forward to is Not by Bread Alone by Naomi Mitchison (June, Marion Boyers Ltd). Some of you might be familiar with her novel Memoirs of a Spacewoman (1962) rather than her more recent novel Solution Three (1975). Another female writer, Doris Lessing, is back again in April with The Sentimental Agents in the Volyen Empire, the fifth novel in The Canopus in Argos series. The Bookseller describes it as a "high-spirited skit on a number of sacred cows, political and social". I'm now going to commit suicide in print by saying that I'm not a great fan of Doris Lessing and while I have read a couple of her books I do not find them very accessible. But, I must be an oddball as far as Lessing goes because other people buy the books enough to make them reach the bestsellers list, so I expect it is my loss.

One trend that does appear in the forthcoming books is a predilection for doom and despair. If the bomb does not drop tomorrow then fiction will more than make up for it... and if the bomb does not work then we will be living in a totalitarian state anyway. The heavy-weight of the group is Mike Moorcock with a non-fiction book called The Erosion of Liberty. "A disturbing examination of the ways in which the movements of the 1960's and 1970's towards a liberalised society are slowly being eroded on the road to 1984 by various subtle and not-so-subtle means, in the UK and elsewhere" the blurb says. A good book for paranoids! From Michael Joseph in March comes Regenesis by Alexander Fullerton; "a dramatic, imaginative and utterly unputdownable story of the post-holocaust future". Fullerton normally writes naval stories in his 'Everard' series so the novel might be intriguing simply because he has never written science fiction before, but I have my doubts. From the same publishers a book that might be of interest to some readers is The Mists of Avalon by Marion Zimmer Bradley, she, whom some call the SF Barbara Cartland, which is slightly unfair. Michael Joseph are pushing it as the cult novel of 1983 and they might be right as it weaves together two popular themes. On the one hand it is a retelling of the Arthurian legend, but told through the eyes of Guinevere and Morgaine, which adds a novel twist. As to its quality, I've no idea, but as to its popularity in America it has 22,500 copies in print! We should see it sometime in May. This Spring Gollancz are having a field day with short story collections with Silverberg's Sunrise on Mercury, Le Guin's The Compass Rose and Walter Tevis's Far From Home. While I can see that the Tevis and Le Guin will have a ready market and are worthwhile reprinting in book format, I do wonder why they republished the Silverberg collection. Of the 13 stories, one was in 1969, one in 1974, and all the others predate 1960, the earliest being 1954. I've heard of ransacking history, but... One novel from Gollancz that I am looking forward to is Cat Karina by Michael Coney (May). Coney's new novel "is set in the distant future, when true humans coexist uneasily with a variety of not-quite-human beings, the products of ancient genetic experiments. Among those are the felinos, who have jaguar genes in their ancestry and the story centres on one of these, Karina, whose destiny is to bear the child of a true human, thereby setting in motion an immensely important sequence of events". I don't know who writes the blurbs at Gollancz - that's enough to put one off reading the book, but on past record alone, Brontomek! and Hello Summer, Goodbye, it should be well worth reading. Downbelow Station by C.J. Cherryh was the 1982 winner of the Hugo Award, and thus I find it

EDITORIAL

Geoff Rippington.....3

This is the sixth issue of Vector that I have had the pleasure of editing, and I must admit that if you had asked me this time last year if I would be continuing with the magazine it would have been difficult to give an answer. But, much to my surprise I still do enjoy editing Vector even though the pressure of the six deadlines has taken its toll, not just on me, but on all the people that have to put up with me phoning them up every other day and being late with the copy deadlines. My thanks to John and Eve Harvey, Paul Kincaid and Joseph Nicholas. I'm afraid you'll have to put up with me for a while longer!

This is not to say that I'm totally happy with the way the magazine has been running. Vector, within the BSFA, has a dual function. It is the showpiece of its publications, but is also the Critical Journal. As a showpiece the magazine has not been doing too badly. Over the last year Vector has published the important speeches of the year and we have had articles and interviews with a fair proportion of the British and American science fiction writers. One criterion of success is to see how much of Vector's material is published elsewhere. Well, 10% of the latest issues of the American magazines Starship and SF Review has also appeared in Vector. What does concern me though is that the amount of critical comment published in Vector over the last year has not been as much as I would have liked. In the following year I hope to strike a balance between the important speeches and interviews and also publish original articles exploring the sub-world of science fiction. This issue starts the ball rolling.

JOSEPH NICHOLAS has been reviews editor of Vector for the past 4 years. He has guided that part of the magazine with professional care and expertise. Over the years he has built up a range of reviewers that has kept the standard of reviewing at a consistently high level. However, time does not stand

still and Joseph has decided to call it a day and resign from the position of reviews editor effective from issue 114. It would be a lie to say that Joseph and I have agreed on the review policy of Vector, as we have differing views on how it should be handled, (I think we would both agree that we have spent more than enough time, in that last year, discussing it!) and this is hardly the time to discuss those differences. Although giving up the position of Vector's reviews editor Joseph will still continue in his position of Paperback Inferno's editor and will, of course, still write reviews for Vector.

I am sure that you will all join me in thanking Joseph for all the time and effort that he has put into the position of Vector's review editor.

Due to Joseph's resignation the position of Reviews Editor is now vacant. However, for the time being, and at least for the next four issues, I will be amalgamating the position of Reviews Editor with my own. I hope to get in touch with all the reviewers within the next few weeks but if I'm a bit late, or you would just like to have a word please write, or better still, phone me. If anyone wishes to review for Vector who has not done so before, please don't hesitate to get in touch.

Further details of the Science Fiction Fortnight (10-22 October 1983) are now available, I'll quote in full; "The Book Marketing Council is planning to run a promotion for paperback science fiction titles this autumn. Interest in science fiction has been running high for several years but the sales potential of this category has yet to be fully exploited. The BMC's promotion is designed to help maximise sales of this category of books. Publishers are invited to submit details of not more than five titles for consideration by a panel of booksellers and other science fiction experts. The panel will select the twenty titles which best represent the field. Submissions should fall into the mainstream of the science fiction genre and will thus exclude sword and sorcery, horror, the occult

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and pure fantasy. * That rather vague definition of science fiction came from me. I tried to define by exclusion rather than inclusion. But like any definition it has hit problems. Is, for instance, The Sword of the Lictor, sword and sorcery? Yes and no? What is pure fantasy? Does A Plague of Demons by Keith Laumer or Simak's The Goblin Reservation come under this heading? I'm not trying to strike an argument about definitions (God forbid!) but rather just show the sort of problems that could arise. Once all the applications are in I'll give you what details I can.

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Cy should need no introduction to BSFA members as he has had articles published in Vector consistently for many years. His last two articles were published in Vector 97 and 102. For those of you who are familiar with Cy's work will know that he is rather enamoured with the work of Ursula Le Guin which makes the article even more interesting as it ends on a point, I feel, Le Guin would totally disagree with. Intriguing. Yes?

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Sue is currently attempting to become a librarian at the Wales College of Librarianship and when I wrote to her asking for an article she came back with a fascinating idea concerning non book media, science fiction and libraries. Sue thinks I will get one of three responses to the article; (1) yawn and turn the page (2) yawn and think: "not another article on.." or (3) think "gosh, how interesting; (unlikely). On reading the article I think you will agree that (3) was the correct one to go for...

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Barrington Bayley has the knack of taking a simple, respectable idea, turning it upside down, inside out, reverting it back to its former shade and ending up with something totally different. In his first Into The Arena column Barry Bayley takes a look at the copyright laws which we all take for granted. But I wonder if you will after reading this article...

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Reviews by Judith Hanna, Brian Smith, Geraint Day, Graham Andrews and Nick Lowe on books by Peter Tremayne, Patrick Moore, A.A. Attanasio, Ursula Le Guin, and J.G. Ballard. Remarkably, considering the names above, I've decided not to give a Vector's Choice this issue.

ARTWORK

The cover, this issue, is by Thys Ebbenhoist. Thys has just sold his first short story to Daw books so keep your eyes open for it.

EDITORIAL CONTINUED

faintly amazing that its first UK publication is in paperback (have I missed the hardback?). You would have thought that the library sales alone would make it worthwhile.

And that, would you believe it, apart from a few oddments and Hale, is that. I would suggest that in a couple of years hardback science fiction will be too much of a financial gamble and thus be a thing of the past. I'm not quite sure what to make of that.

Geoff Rippington.

Cliché - The Freedom Of Science Fiction

Cy Chauvin

In *Sexual Politics*, Kate Millet devotes a chapter to D.H. Lawrence. Her comments at one point sound like those of a futurist extrapolating from a science fiction novel:

Tommy Dukes, one of the author's humbler mouthpieces, has deplored the fact that there are no "real" men and woman left in the world, predicting the fall of civilization on this account. We are all doomed unless the one hope of redemption is understood immediately. "It's going down the bottomless pit, down the chasm. And believe me, the only bridge across the chasm will be the phallus!" ...Yet the program the novel offers against the industrial horrors it describes with such verve and compassion, is a simple matter: men should adapt a costume of tight red trousers and short white jackets and the working class should cease to desire money. In a single elaboration, Mellors suggests they busy themselves with folk art and country dances. This would be cruel, if it were not ridiculous. While a sexual revolution, in terms of a change in attitudes, and even in psychic structure, is undoubtedly essential to any radical social change, this is very far from being what Lawrence has in mind. His recipe is a mixture of Morris and Freud, which would do away with machiney and return industrial England to something like the middle ages. Primarily it is to be accomplished by a reversion to older sexual roles. (p. 340)

Millet's comments make one wonder about the relationship between science fiction and politics, and at what point literature can be said to be about individual characters and their individual viewpoints, and not meant as a prescription for society as a whole. Lawrence's discontent (as expressed through this character in *Lady Chatterly's Lover*) is taken to be a prescription for a future society, and as a prescription, as Millet points out, it is ludicrous. But could it just be the viewpoint of an individual character, rather than that of the author?

This leads me to wonder how much freedom an author has in the creation of his or her characters, once a world has been extrapolated for a story. How do science fiction authors work? Do they create their characters first, or a society or environment? James Blish said that he always tried to choose a character that the background in his story would hurt most, and Blish's practice seem to make good dramatic sense. This choice also seems to be a natural one for the science fiction writer, since the interaction between character and environment/society/science is that particular area in which SF (by its very nature) excels. Choosing a character and then an environment strikes me as being the choice of a writer for whom a story's background is meaningless, or else pre-determined.

But the actual course of a character's action in a story is often open to debate. The most notable example of this sort of discussion concerns Le Guin's The Left Hand of Darkness. Some readers have complained that Le Guin was in error not to include in her novel a successful sexual encounter between Genly Ali (the Terran envoy sent to Winter) and Estraven (one of the native humanoid heramphroities, who are sexually neuter most of the year but become sexually active at certain periods - in "Kemmer" - and become male or female, depending upon certain indefinite factors or/and the state of their partner). The novel contains a long section in which Genly Ali and Estraven cross an icefield after escaping from prison, and during this crossing Estraven goes into "Kemmer". Genly Ali, an ordinary human, is (as the other inhabitants of Winter say) "always in Kemmer". This debate is not merely a matter of readers disagreeing with Le Guin's interpretation of Genly Ali's character, apparently, or finding it unconvincing - although it is my view that a relationship between two persons, once set up, is difficult to change, and for anyone to change in such a strange way as does Estraven (from a totally non-sexual being into a woman) would be certain to send most people into shock; Genly Ali's abstinence seems natural in this situation. There is, obviously, more than sexual desire operating in this situation. But recent criticism has gone beyond calling this portion of the novel unconvincing; Samuel Delaney has called it a cliché. Indeed, he says the novel has a structure that is clichéd:

"Too many space operas are simply horse operas dressed up with spaceships and ray guns. In one, Bat Durstan gallops off behind some sagebrush, pulls out his six gun, and hunkers down to blast the rustlers. In the space opera version, Bat Durstan plunges his chronocrafter behind some asteroid, pulls out his laser canon, and hunkers down to blast the space pirates..."

My point is that Le Guin's SF story bears this kind of relationship to a seemingly endless number of "gay" novels, written in the Thirties/Forties/Fifties/Sixties, that spanned the spectrum from "literature" to "trash". They included, at the literary end, Gore Vidal's The City and the Pillar, and, at the trash end, something called The Twilight Men by some pseudonymous writer with a French nom de plume. (Intriguingly, Vidal has revised his early novel, saying that some of its more clichéd aspects came from a fear of publisher pressure.)... Let me say that those of us who were gay in the Fifties and who wanted to read any contemporary fiction about our own sexuality were more or less restricted to these books; a novel whose main character was gay - even if the plot was largely about his refusing to have sex - was still considered borderline pornography, and just not sold in paperback "at better bookstores everywhere." I picked up my copy of The Twilight Men from the same, dusty rack from which I bought Philip Jose Farmer's A Woman A Day - wondering what both of them were doing there. At any rate, these stories were structurally ossified enough even then to be recognizable anywhere. And their message was pretty depressing... Need one say it? This kind of relationship to a set of genre clichés is very different from the critical and ironic relationship that, say, Bester's The Stars My Destination (Tiger! Tiger!) bears to Dumas's The Count of Monte Cristo.

Now certainly The Left Hand of Darkness is no more "an example" of a doomed homosexual affair plot than Bat Durstan, Space Ranger is "an example" of a western plot. But The Left Hand of Darkness bears the same relationship to this run of gay novels (checklist of them have been compiled by gay researchers, and they do run on) that Bat bears to a certain class of hack western. And when the relation is as close as this one is, the one is rendered trite just by the over-riding preponderance of the other. Nor is the relation exhausted merely by Estraven's death. The entire structure of the one follows the structure of the other, from the social intrigues of Karhyde/the social intrigues of the Decadent-Gay-Society (that is invariably presented in the first 25 pages), and on to the refusal to consummate the relationship ("No, we can't...It's just wrong, even though we both want it...") to the bitter, remorseful end.

((Now)), if the SF writer will be rigorous in feeling, experiencing and

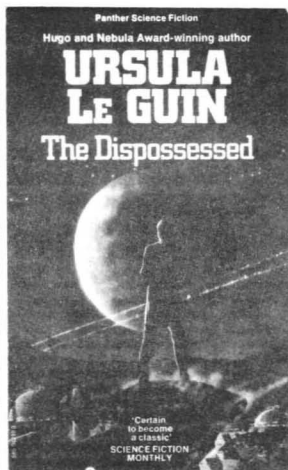
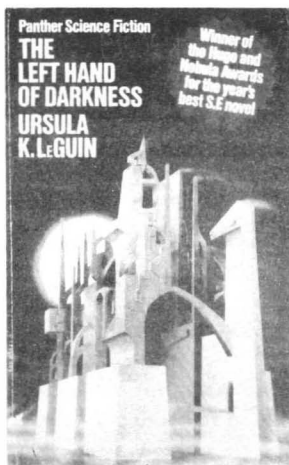
exploring the effect of her or his SF situation on the character, there is a chance to make art of those differences even if one starts out with an arguably horse opera situation. In order to do this, one has to go to life (not horse opera, but the textured experience of one's own everyday life) and translate it into the SF situations, restructuring them as you go. ("OK, what, from my own daily experience, could I use to portray what being in a small closed container, with no gravity, hanging in space and under attack, would make me feel and do if I were outside on a live animal in bright sunlight?") If you follow such SF logic rigorously, even if you start out with a horse opera situation, you can end up with SF - good SF - because the SF logic will take you away from the horse opera structure if you let it. The Left Hand of Darkness, however, begins and ends in the clichéd conventions of the gay novel of the Fifties.. It is precisely at the points where the SF logic of Le Guin's plot would take her into those areas that would shatter any simple and uncritical analogue with such novels, such as the raising of children on Winter, the direct presentation of any satisfactory sexuality, etc., that the plot shunts these topics off stage (they are referred to, but never shown) and the gay novel plot cliché instead propels the story away from precisely where its SF interest lies.. During the writing of The Left Hand of Darkness, Le Guin did not translate life into science fiction.. in the fully rigorous and creative way the genre demands - but rather went to other art for her model, in this case to the hugely shared atrocities of what is largely bad art.

I think the appropriation was uncritical and almost certainly unintentional. Usually a writer makes such uncritical appropriations simply because, at certain points in the writing, it just "feels like a good story" to contour events in a particular way. And there is no concerted intellectual probing into where these particular story conventions and contours come from. The aesthetic urge to do something different and new at this particular level is absent. Usually the writer is simply interested in other things - and frequently is unaware that the particular level is there to be dealt with!

There is no crime in this/ political or otherwise. I feel that strongly and cannot say it too frequently. It is still, however, an aesthetic failing. When I am removed from the polemical situation of discussing specifically the politics of art, all I'm really prepared to say about it is that this particular limited - and limiting - aspect of Le Guin's book is just not one that contributes to its richness - a considerable richness at that, a richness which I'm perfectly willing to admit is there, and that I have received much pleasure from. But an aesthetic flaw, while it is not a crime, should not be taken as a mark of political astuteness and human insight."

This piece is extraordinarily interesting, and Delaney's discussion of "SF Logic" is very important. But I think Delaney's background has lead him to see relationships and parallels in The Left Hand of Darkness that few others would see. How many will find that the relationship Le Guin's novel (apparently) has with the gay novel renders it "trite just by the overriding perponderance of the other" (i.e., the doomed homosexual affair novel)? I don't believe these novels are widely read; I don't feel that they have filtered into the general cultural background in the way that Bat Durston (the western) has. This is not surprising, since gay culture has hardly become fully integrated into mainstream culture or (dare I say it?) into the science fiction sub-culture. The question then becomes, how widely exposed must some fictional device be in order to become a cliché?

There may not, however, even be the same sort of relation between The Left Hand of Darkness and the doomed homosexual affairs novel as there is between the SF space opera (Bat Durston et al.) and the western that Delaney sees. The space opera is a whole sub-genre in SF, while The Left Hand of Darkness belongs to no sub-genre, nor does it reflect even a trend in SF, but is just an individual novel. SF invites the construction of parallels, and this is really all Delaney has done. He has constructed a relationship, but it will only have as much validity as each individual reader will bring to it. Alexei Panshin gives an excellent example of



this parallel construction syndrome at work:

"When I began Rite of Passage in 1961, a parallel between the basic situation of powerful scientifically advanced ships and powerless retarded Colony Planets that I had premised, and the Have and Have-Not nations occurred to me. When I gave the book to Chip Delany to read in the summer of 1967, however, the parallel didn't occur to him. He thought it was 'too obviously' about the blacks and whites in America. Some six months later, when I was proofreading the galleys of the novel at the time of the Tet Offensive, it struck me that anyone reading the book would necessarily think it was about the the U.S. in Vietnam. Finally, when the book was published, one of the first reviews of it that I saw said, 'In reading Rite of Passage, I was reminded of the Sephardim and Ashkenazim in Israel. I wonder if Panshin had this in mind?' " (SF in Dimension, Fantastic, Feb. 1972, p97)

These parallels are obviously constructed by the reader, and are not "uncritical" "appropriations" by the authors. Nor are the parallels fixed. Gay novels may focus on successful love affairs (the two I've read did), and thus for a new generation of readers the parallels Delaney sees with The Left Hand of Darkness won't be there. The space opera, however, will always have a fixed relationship with the western plot - no one will ever compare it to a doomed homosexual affair novel, or the black and white struggle in America! Perhaps yet another reason for the space opera's poverty of imagination is this very lack of flexibility: it cannot hold the same number of relationships to our everyday life as other SF novels, it does not offer the same (multi-) number of parallels, or the different vantage points

for the reader. (If SF novels had no parallels with our everyday experience, their characters would be unexplainably alien and their plots inexplicable: probably this is a more accurate depiction of the unknown universe, but it would leave us without any meaning for our art!)

Delany is projecting his own reading experience and ideas into Le Guin's novel, and while his ideas can fit, any aesthetic failure resulting is of Delany's creation, not Le Guin's. Le Guin, of course, does have the same problem as many other SF writers, when it comes to the working out of her novel's "SF Logic": sometimes the SF logic of her background comes into direct conflict with the dramatic logic of her plot. This is a problem all SF writers deal with: what is more important, to explain how all this works, or to present the emotion of the characters. Gregory Benford once contrasted the "thrill of scientific discovery" with the thrill of revealed human emotion, and I think he was referring to the same dichotomy. Le Guin's shunting of much of the action offstage - through the tales set between alternating chapters, literary/fictional sidebars - seems an adequate solution to this dilemma.

I love SF content, but I realise, too, that an excess of this informational noise will destroy much of the dramatic excitement of a novel, just as too much "drama" (excitement and conflict and coincidence) for its own sake will lead to the pulpy stage of "melodrama". The desire for yet more background, for all the ramifications of a background or world is the motive behind all the appendices, concordances, dictionaries and many fanzines published on Tolkien, Star Trek, etc. These make me feel uneasy, just as did the questions from one radio interviewer about Mr. Spock. He asked questions proceeding from the assumption that Spock was real, and couldn't understand that most of Spock's features, attitudes and background were created for dramatic effect. 'Who does this hurt most?' is after all a dramatic question, even if Blish always applied it to a rigorously worked out scientific background or situation.

The novel that demonstrates most clearly this dichotomy in SF is Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time*. The most dramatic, the most moving portions of that novel are all set in the present day, and centre around a poor Puerto Rican woman forced to enter a mental institution. She is visited in her delirium by a messenger from the future, and goes back with the messenger periodically (during each visit to the future she blacks out or experiences some other form of lack-of-consciousness). This future is rural, utopian and feminist, and each visit seems to center around a particular theme (death, the environment), and how this future world has solved or at least copes with this problem in a manner superior to our own time. Piercy undoubtedly thought this future interesting because of its workability, but I found her solutions to be too practical to be original. The only interesting segment not set in the present was a short scene in an alternate dystopian future - the one that would happen, I suppose, if Things Go On As They Are - because there is some tension and conflict in that scene. Utopias imply stasis (perfection has been reached), and with this is an absence of dramatic conflict. (Perhaps this is why some anarchists found Le Guin's "ambiguous utopia" *The Dispossessed* dull - they already knew the philosophy and background.) Perhaps *The Woman on the Edge of Time* is worthy just because Piercy puts forward a logical and workable prescription for her world, just the reverse of that which Kate Millet found in D.H. Lawrence (although, curiously, both Piercy and Lawrence imply that a rural world is better than an urban one); but I still found myself wanting to skip forward in Piercy's novel to the scenes set in the present, to the drama.

Perhaps characters are only puppets animated by the author (no matter what authors may insist about "characters have a life of their own"), and all the characters' views and actions are only extensions of the author's own. Maybe there can be no true "secondary creation" here, no real freedom. Science fiction gives the author the freedom to create a new environment, but in turn accepts that the created environment prescribes certain types of characters and character action. D.H. Lawrence had one kind of freedom and responsibility; science fiction writers have another.

My local library is thinking about providing a lending collection of videotapes. Not an earth-shattering event, this, even to somebody who spends as much time hanging about the Recently Returned shelves as I do. But it started me wondering what impact, if any, such a development might have on people like me.

My main interest in the public library is the hardback SF. Paperbacks I can buy for myself. The Music Library at my local is full of cassette recordings (which I don't have the equipment to play) rather than discs (which I do), otherwise I would take much more interest in music. But videos? I could hire playback equipment easily enough. Assuming I had the necessary hardware, but what would I be interested in?

A Strange New Language

Perhaps the sound recording of The Hitchhikers' Guide to the Galaxy; taken from the radio serial, which I thought vastly superior to the book, though I was much impressed by the computer graphics of the TV serial, which brought the Guide itself to life most convincingly. And the video of Star Wars, of course, though there is a good scene in the book which must have been cut from the film. I suppose the library could stock the original Star Trek videos, rather than those awful 'novelisation' short story collections, and I expect it would take Blade Runner as well as Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?

As well as? Or would it be instead of? More and more libraries have less

Sue Thomason

and less money to spend. This is resulting in things like written stock selection policies, which pose questions to Those Who Buy, like 'is this item presented in the most effective medium for its message?' What this means is that no library will consider buying the book and the video of Hitchhikers. They will decide which version is 'the best', and buy that, or which version is most 'in demand', and buy that.

So far, so good. I can accept that all the items cited above are examples of different versions of the same thing. But what about 2001, the film? It has a preceding short story, "The Sentinel", and a subsequent novel which now has its

own independent sequel. These three things, short story, film and novel, are clearly related, and clearly quite different from each other. They evoke quite different responses. But a modern library might want to avoid the 'duplication' of stocking all of them. Or, another extreme example: should a library that stocks videos include recordings of, say, the BBC Shakespeare series instead of the texts of his plays? A purist might argue that those plays, any plays, were written to be acted, not read. The experience of reading the text is quite different to that of seeing the play performed, and surely not what the author intended?

This leads to the key question: what medium best suits SF? Theodore Sturgeon in the Encyclopedia Americana says, 'SF and the visual media are admirably suited to each other'. The anonymous author of the corresponding article on science fiction in Encyclopaedia Britannica, 15th ed., says that SF is 'a major and perhaps the age's characteristic literary form' (my emphasis). S.R. Delany, a man with more good ideas than he knows what to do with, says that the landscape is the primary hero of SF (novels), and in the same breath that language is the secondary hero. Pick your own viewpoint, retreat ten paces, turn and fire. The only thing that nearly everybody agrees on is that of these two media, visual and print, one of them must be vastly superior in every way to the other. Hence the long-standing feud between 'fans' and 'media fans', for instance. The division holds true outside SF, as well. When a public library in the North of England did establish a videotape lending collection, it acquired, almost overnight, more than 600 new borrowers, many of whom had never before used a public library. They showed no interest in the book stock at all.

Oddly, the 'which medium is best' dispute is not as intense in most other creative fields. Imagine seriously trying to answer questions like 'which is better, Rouen Cathedral, or Monet's paintings of it? Or, 'which is best, the original pictures at the exhibition Moussorgsky saw, or the music inspired by them?' These questions are meaningless. There is no comparison. Art breeds art. There are probably far more works of good, bad and mediocre art which have been directly inspired by another human being's creative work, than works which have been copied from 'nature'. Art is all about copying, borrowing, developing other peoples' ideas. 'Derived from' is not necessarily an insult. Each new format or treatment adds something to the original, more depth, a new dimension, fresh ideas. Shakespeare cribbed his plots from Holinshed. Chaucer rewrote half the popular literature of his age. Handel didn't originate the words of the Messiah, and if he acquired a good tune, he used it again and again.

Part of the problem with SF is that typical SF ideas, of their very nature, are highly visual. Sturgeon and Delany are right. As soon as we read a descriptive passage we form a vivid image of the alien landscape being described. Thus the typical reaction of somebody who has read the book first and then sees the film, or sometimes even an illustration, is 'but that's all wrong, Pierson's Puppeteers (or whatever) don't look/sound/move like that.' Instead of taking the work on its own terms, we compare it with our preconceptions, and if it doesn't fit, we complain that the realisation of one set of images destroys all the other sets we had in our imagination, rather than adding to them. Perhaps this is why novelisations written after the film are so often bad: they do not try to add anything to the strong stimuli we have already absorbed, they are simply a greyer version of the excitement and immediacy of seeing it happen.

But Britannica and Delany are right, too. Language shapes thought. New ideas demand new language. Where would 1984 be without Newspeak, or Babel-17 without its eponymous language, or Clockwork Orange (ah, but how many people know the film rather than the somewhat demanding text?) I will bet that at least one of your favourite SF stories employs language in some aspect as a crucial element of the story. There are a very large number of plots which deal with the discovery and understanding of a new concept or the communication of a new idea to somebody. They are, after all, two of SF's major themes.

Why, then, can we accept strange new language, but not new pictures? The answer is that this isn't the right question. Major creators in all media who have done something radically new have found their work met by incomprehension, derision

and rejection. Beethoven, Turner, Joyce: the list is long. And a lot of us print addicts have no idea how to judge films (say) as films; we are too busy condemning them as bad remakes of the book. Of course, in print, we have the upper hand. We can fulminate away to each other about those dreadful films, displaying our ignorance and contempt without fear of reprisal, because print is out medium. All the people who could defend visual SF against us are out there watching more, not reading.

Perhaps the root of the problem is that in SF, these two media, visual and literary, are seen as being in direct competition with each other. The genre is a battlefield; may the best format win! This is silly, because each medium is better at doing different things. A short story is not the same as a novel, a novel is not the same as a film. Not many people seem to be able to resist the urge to turn A into B, and B into C, but perhaps the rest of us would feel better about it all if we realised that the separate elements of that sequence have very little to do with each other. I'm a strong supporter of the (less and less frequent) practice of giving each version a different title. Then we all know what we're getting.

This ability to distinguish between formats is important. For example, nobody should confuse 2001 the film with 2001 the book, particularly as the film contains long wordless sequences which are truly visual narrative and cannot be adequately conveyed in print. The book contains detailed information about characters' moods and thoughts, explanations which would be impossible in a film. Book and film have different viewpoints, as we should expect, because they are different works; only the titles are the same.

It is only in narrative works that this conflict and confusion between verbal and visual occurs. SF pictures are mostly fine (except for the bookjacket problem) because nobody in our culture would mistake a picture for a story. I would even suggest that there is a strong case for broadening what we consider as SF to include not only illustrations (flat art) but also 3-D works. I am particularly attracted by the work of 'earth artists' or 'environmental artists'. For example, there is a work of art in New Mexico called Lightning Field. It consists of a field planted with several thousand lightning conductors. In a thunderstorm (the site was chosen with storm frequency, among other things, in mind) the results are spectacular. I've seen a video of it...I've also read John Varley's Phantom of Kansas. Or consider the work of Charles Simonds, who builds miniature landscapes and dwellings for an imaginary, tiny people. Through his art, he develops his ideas about their civilisation: social structures, beliefs, work. You might think of him as A Bit Odd, what would you think if he wrote novels about his people instead? What about the work of Christo, who hung an orange curtain across a valley in California, who built a 24½-mile long fabric fence across a stretch of farmland, beginning and ending in the sea? After a few days he took it down. What is he saying about landscape, about walls, in that work? Could it be similar to the first few paragraphs of The Dispossessed?

Unfortunately, it will be a long time before libraries have the resources to acquire adequate representations of works like Lightning Field or Christo's Running Fence, not to mention the problems involved in cataloguing and classifying them. But libraries do concern themselves increasingly with non-book media; an art library might think seriously about buying the video of the thunderstorm... which brings us back to where we were at the beginning of this article, with a handful of interesting ideas to consider. SF is a visual and a verbal artform. Care should be taken in condemning works as derivative; does treatment in a different medium add to or diminish the original idea? We should not think of films and books as trying to do the same things, competing with each other, and start concentrating on exploiting their unique strengths, recognising their differences.

Recently, I read an article on public libraries which said that by the year 2000, only 40% of the library stock in an average library would be printed materials of any kind. The rest will mostly be video. Video will not entirely supcede books; sound recordings have not entirely replaced the need for music scores. But what format SF, if it still exists, will be in, is up to us, the producers and consumers. As the saying goes, the future is in our hands....

Dangerous Divisions

(((Dangerous Divisions, as promised last issue, includes letters from Vector 110, 111 and 112. I've kept the correspondence of each issue separate so you can easily refer to what they are discussing.)))

ISSUE 110

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On Blade Runner/Electric Sheep Steve Gallagher raises two points which, you'll be relieved to know, are all I want to talk about.

First, the book as we now have it is called Blade Runner, which is, if nothing else, a vastly inferior title. If moral obligations mean anything in publishing, then Granada should actually be proudly pointing out that Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep? is the original book on which the film was based, plugging the film, of course, but plugging the book as it was, and is, even more. What is tucked away as a "publisher's note" should be blazoned on the front cover. It's naive, of course, to expect a 'film of the book' to be the same as the book; for a start, they're two different media and what works in one won't in the other. (Take Roadside Picnic/Stalker, for example: they're both brilliant works, but, despite the fact that the film was, I believe, scripted by the Strugatsky brothers, its actually extremely difficult and probably in the end irrelevant to look at them as directly linked). (((Stalker, a brilliant film? While Solaris had its boring moments, as far as I'm concerned, Stalker was just one long boring moment.))) The 'novelisation' syndrome seems to me to cater precisely for this naivety.

However, I wouldn't totally condemn novelisations as literary creations. It is possible to adapt a film into book form with at least as much success as vice versa: perhaps not in the first rank of art but decent, honest craftsmanlike creations. I'd point out some of the work of Richard Carpenter, who has made a good line out of adapting children's TV series (such as Catweazle) into book form. Some (not all!) of the Dr. Who adaptations come into this category, as well. Perhaps the point really at issue is that a worthwhile 'novelisation' can only come from a worthwhile original - I don't know of any reputable adaptations of a film or TV series which is itself in essence garbage, and however skilled the writer, the old adage about silk purses and sows' ears comes to mind.

Steve Gallagher's Guest Editorial had a philosophically interesting effect on me, in that I agreed very much with his reasoning and conclusion, while disagreeing completely with his initial premise. The blurb in Blade Runner is surely not 'in-print toadying' or 'an apology from the publishers because the text falls short of being a novelisation'. I don't think I'm being naive in reading it as a simple statement that the book is substantially different from the film - and anyone, having seen the film, then coming to the book

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as their introduction to Philip K. Dick, might be forgiven for wondering if they had picked up the right book; there is so little similarity. In fact, the only redeeming feature of the film, in my view, is that it might introduce a decent number of people to the convoluted worlds of Dick.

The bastardisation of literature into glossily commercial films, and the implied and subliminally implanted belief that the movie is the real thing, and love of literature is only for pedants, is something we must fight against. In fact, the ending of Gallagher's piece is a substantiation of my (strangely) controversial point in V108: viz., to put it bluntly, those of US who have discovered and appreciate quality SF should make more noise about it, and make sure that we are heard; if we do not, then even more of the science fiction available - in any medium - will be dictated by THEM, i.e., in Gallagher's words, 'people whose lips move as they read.' The average BSFA member, if there could be such an animal, is far more of an expert on SF - and has had more experience at separating the rare grains of wheat from the mass of chaff and, what is perhaps more important, can explain on what grounds he did so - than the 'average' reader of science fiction, be it SF or SciFi (or Fantasy, S&S, Gothic Horror, comics, films, TVSF or any other part of the whole, however the whole is defined and whatever we call it). For an expert to declare himself as such, and to attempt to educate and influence non-experts, is not elitism; it is his duty; he is making proper and socially valuable use of his specialist knowledge and interest.

I'm afraid I must question your editorial judgement again. What possible grounds could you have for including that appallingly written, egocentric piece of crap by Josephine Saxton? Just judge it by the standard of Richard Cowper's excellent, literate piece, which was very personal without being egocentric; there's no comparison. In a sentence, Cowper can Write; Saxton can't, but thinks she can. All that her piece has done for me - apart from annoying me - is to make me decide not to bother to read anything else by the woman. (((You're not really questioning my 'editorial judgement', you're just proving that people have different tastes. To compare the styles of Cowper and Saxton is difficult, simply because they are so different. Each style and article has its own merits.)))

Why do you feel it would be dangerous and 'nearly impossible' to follow C.S. Lewis's guidance on reviewers and reviews? If I read a review by someone who says "I love Harry Harrison's work, but this one stinks," I'll take more note than if I were to read, "I can't stand any Harrison, and this one is worse than all the others put together." And conversely, if I read, "Usually I can't stomach McCaffrey, but this one is excellent," it is almost certainly a more valid review than one beginning, "I eagerly awaited Anne McCaffrey's latest novel, having loved everything she had written so far, and I was not disappointed." If a reviewer is forced by the virtues, or the lack of virtues, of a book, to overcome his prejudices, negative or positive, then his comments are going to be honest, revealing and interesting. And the reader of the review will know that the book in question is indeed brilliant or appalling. (((I feel it is dangerous because, unless you have brutally honest reviewers, you might end up with always positive comments from a reviewer who likes that author, or reversely, negative comments from a reviewer who dislikes a particular author. There is also the danger of ending up with bland reviews. It would be nearly impossible to operate as I would need to know every reviewer's likes or dislikes before I sent a book out for review. I suppose it could be done but I wonder if the results would be worth the work.)))

I've a few interesting quotations from the Frank Delaney programme on BBC2 last night, plus a couple of others I was reminded of, on the subject of critics/reviewers which I would like to throw into the continuing debate; Bernard Levin; the only purpose of criticism "is to express my views about what I'm writing about." (i.e. sod objectivity) Christopher Ricks; "The critic tries to help you see what someone else has noticed; he is a middleman." Marina Valzey; "I am an animated signpost...I feel successful when someone goes and sees it for himself."

"A critic is like a eumuch: he sees it being done every night, he knows how it's done, but he can't do it himself." (How true, how true..!)

Henry James; "We must grant the artist his subject, his idea, his donne; our criticism is applied only to what he makes of it."

"I don't understand it, so it must be good" - often heard dig at critics of modern art, amongst other things.

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I found Peter Stockill's thoughts on 2001 interesting (if occasionally contradictory - for instance, does Clarke believe that Man shall be replaced by computers, or that He shall become god-like?), and thought that I might add some of my own.

It should be difficult to believe that it isn't clear to everyone who has seen 2001 that it "had something to do with extraterrestrial beings"; it's simply that the final scenes are almost totally meaningless (intellectually - not emotionally). If one is concerned with 'realism' in SF films, this is surely as it should be to represent an incalculably old and alien race (or entity...or presence...or whatever).

I don't see how the 'Garden of Eden' comparison can possibly be justified: as Peter points out himself, Man is entirely at the mercy of other animals - not the master of them. His comparison of the Starchild with Jesus Christ seems even more contrived. If there is a religion in the film, it is, I think, the belief in the divine potential of Man (as the article perhaps hints at later).

"Only man kills its own kind." What about the Black Widow Spider, or warring ants? Kubrick is quoted on page 331 of The Making of Kubrick's 2001: "these beings would be gods to the billions of less advanced races in the universe, just as man would appear a god to an ant that somehow comprehended man's existence." If both Man and Ant kill their own kind, do 2001's extraterrestrials? It could be argued that the film seems to present the introduction of murder as an integral part of their evolutionary plan.

Referring once more to the article, I don't think that 2001's purpose is just to mystify or entertain, but also to inspire the audience: no matter how low He may seem to be, there is still something worthwhile within Man (or at least within the descendants of Moonwatcher!).

The Big Question has now been answered. That is, who replaces Phil Dick as the US's foremost (living) SF writer? As far as I'm concerned this must surely be Gene Wolfe. With The Book of the New Sun he provides one of the best SF fiction of recent times, especially from the US. I await volume four impatiently I'm glad to say. The first three, rather than being some epic mammoth-sized series of Silberberg dimensions, are all too brief as far as I'm concerned. They delight, provoke and even astound at times. If there is one feeling that emerges, it is the total effortless control Wolfe has over his prose; in fact it would be more correct to talk of the prose of Severian; that's the degree of involvement I feel. Severian is a young man, and when I read the bio in the Encyclopedia on Wolfe I was surprised to see that he is 51, only 2 years younger than Dick was. From reading The Book of the New Sun I had somehow grafted the young Severian onto Wolfe, and somehow, due to my involvement in the story, confused the two. This narrative skill sufficiently encouraged me to buy his collection of short stories (The Island of Doctor Death and Other Stories and Other Stories) and my expectations were confirmed. This seems to me to be a very strong collection, especially the last two stories, and of those, "The Eyeflash Miracles" in particular.

This is not to say that his work is without fault; indeed I would question (though only slightly!) Wolfe's subject matter and via this his imagination. I know The Book of the New Sun has deeper undertones, but I can't totally forgive 16.

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him for making it, superficially at least, so sword and sorcery and fantasy-like. I know that he has taken old SF cliches and transcended them, but for potential works of the highest quality, one should be able to avoid SF cliches altogether whether one transcends them or not (as absurdly Wolfe does). What do I mean? Well, summarize what's in them, say to a non-SF enthusiast or friend: "Well, it's about these old medieval type guilds that live in a city of old spaceships, with funny witches next door and this guy with a photographic memory who has this Sword you see, and he goes on this Quest, and then meets the most beautiful girl in the world, with a giant, and also meets a robot, horrible monsters and magic." Feel embarrassed? Can you see his face falling? That's what I mean about old SF cliches, and I think in this respect he shows a lack of experiment and imagination. Anyway this is all in reply to your reviewing the latest volume under the 'Vector's Choice' heading, a couple of issues ago. I certainly agree with this, my finicky criticisms notwithstanding. It's good to see such good works on the market.

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No good science fiction on television. That is the message that rings loud and clear from the pages of BSFA publications. By good I take it that thought provoking material is what is meant, and if this is so then I am at a loss to understand

the lack of even so much as a mention of the one potential gem in months of the programmers predictable science fiction output. I say potential for reasons I shall come to in a moment, but surely any science fiction project that is given three hours continuous peak viewing time is worthy of close examination. However, almost a year has past and still no review has emerged. Perhaps everyone likely to be interested was too busy getting intoxicated on Yule-tide merriment to give it an unblurred view.

I refer to Artemis 81, which was screened during Christmas week 1981 by the BBC.

It dealt with the age old conflict of good and evil, as personified by the arrival on Earth of two celestial brothers, one an Angel of Light, the other of Darkness. The quest of the latter being to sow sickness and discord through the reawakening of Magog (the Scandinavian equivalent of the Greek Goddess Artemis, whence, together with the year these events supposedly take place, the title owes its origin), while his righteous brother seeks to prepare the world for its impending doom. I shall not attempt to elaborate any further than this, as the storyline is convoluted and rather too padded out with, to my mind, a lot of irrelevant interrelationships between certain key characters, which would take a more experienced pen than mine to put into perspective. Nonetheless, the central theme is strong, and, when given the chance, comes across as a good mystery thriller with a fluent range of metaphysical undertones, which does hold the attention. There are some excellent visual sequences, and at times the atmosphere evoked is as absorbing as some of the best examples of surrealist cinema. Against this the performances are undistinguished and the dialogue contrived, and in the end the impression that remains is one of frustration at a good idea failing to fulfill its initial potential.

This, however, is not the point I wish to make. Others may find it faultless. In this instance criticism must give way to the far more relevant issue of what has happened in the hierarchy of the BBC, to enable such a programme to get onto our screens. For here we have an ambitious attempt at putting across thought provoking science fiction at a peak viewing time and lasting a full three hours. Perhaps the end result could have been better, and maybe with further experience future projects of a similar kind will be nearer the mark. The fact is though, that someone in there is prepared to have a shot at producing in depth science fiction, and that someone else has enough confidence in it to put it out at a socially acceptable hour.

If an organisation such as the BSFA fails to even acknowledge such an event,

it should not be critical if the apathy shown results in a television science fiction future of Star Trek and Blake's 7 repeats. I am not suggesting that copies of Vector and Matrix are likely to wantonly adorn the boardroom tables of the BBC, but among its ranks there appear to be at least one or two members, who regard science fiction as a serious artform, and surely there is nowhere we can be certain they will not look in search of feedback. (((Point taken Maxwell. I remember watching the programme myself and it was certainly worthy of attention. The problem is that the BSFA does not pay for its articles or reviews and is thus dependant on the membership to send in material. We can obviously suggest certain subjects to be covered, but if the writer is not interested, then there is not much we can do. One further point is that we only know about these programmes a week or so before they occur, which does not give us much time to arrange something. But I do agree, our coverage could be improved.)))

Stunned. What else can I say? There I am praising the BSFA and what happens? Media Fans!

After reading Chris Priest's article, which I fully agreed with, I envisioned a chunk of letters praising the article. I've always known there were some completely divorced from reality lurking in the BSFA but.....

Who is trying to kid who? A movie is made for the moron, putting it bluntly. Everything is spelled out, micro idea, one by one. Then we come to the crunch - what ideas? Most films are so hackneyed even a moron can cope with what is going to happen next. Of course, as with anything, you get exceptions - 2001 and Blade Runner are two. What makes things worse is that any new member may come to think of the BSFA as a cauldren of media loonies. Do you understand? (((No comment, Gary, no comment!)))

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ISSUE 111

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I was interested to read, and in total agreement with, your editorial for Vector 111. I agree with your summation on the effect that such films as Star Wars have, and their only passing relevance to science fiction. It would be interesting to follow this up,

to try and find out what sort of people are attracted to these films, and what interest they subsequently have in science fiction. Do they, say, think that these are representative of the genre, and thereby dismiss SF as the Ponderosa in 18.

the sky, or do they start to explore SF fiction, developing their appreciation for the genre through a more in depth study of the literature? Personally I tend to favour the former view, and that is not at all good. The situation may reach the stage where people are actually put off SF because they believe that it is all like Star Wars et al, the only books being bought being the novelisations.

Moving on to the Blade Runner question, I find it strange that Trevor Howard did not buy the book because of its cover, and the implications that it was cashing in on the success of the film. For years the packaging and promotion of SF books has been geared up to the goah-wow BEM theory: striking covers bearing little resemblance to the story contained have been the hall-mark of SF for years. They are obviously produced like that to fit in with the image of the SF novel, and as such have been commercially oriented. The Blade Runner cover and marketing is no exception to this rule, although it is perhaps a little more blatant than past examples. SF readers have always had to contend with misleading covers carrying tales of the authors prowess and success. There was even a Star book recently where the title was said to be a Hugo Award Nominee - not a winner, a nominee. If that isn't taking things too far then what is? The commercialism of the publishing world has not yet stopped me buying a book I expect to enjoy. It may have stopped me buying a book I had not heard of before, the cover or blurb being the deciding factor.

Once, when my daughter was about four years old, tired of her constant prattling, I told her to be quiet unless she had anything important to say. There was silence for several minutes and she said plaintively, "But if I can only say important things, I'll never be able to talk at all." Likewise, if it were possible to apply the arguments in your editorial in V111, there would be even less SF than at present.

It is open to debate whether we would be better off without such novels as Lord Valentine's Castle and The Many-Coloured Land, but I would like to say a word in defence of escapist fiction in general.

I think that Lord Valentine's Castle and The Many-Coloured Land are disappointing simply because they are not particularly strong stories. (I have picked on these two only because I happen to have read them). The addition of some kind of message, or the implantation of a social conscience would not improve them in the slightest. The stories you praise are not only "using the genre trappings as a means to express something greater", but also happen to be damn good stories as well, and can be read and enjoyed even if the deeper implications are ignored or missed.

Human beings need escape and relaxation, whether it is a visit to the pub, an evening at the cinema or an SF novel. If I want to learn something, I read non-fiction; if I want entertainment, I read a novel. If the writer can get over some point, or make me stop and think, all the better; but I would rather read a good story without a moral than a poor story with one, however valid the message. There is nothing wrong with pure entertainment, as long as it is good entertainment. We ought to be hoping for better SF generally, not just saying that authors should not put pen to paper unless they want to preach to us. (((Whoa! I'm just as much against didactic/preachy fiction as you are, that is just another form of poor writing. All I ask is that people be fully aware of what they are reading. For instance, I get a great deal of enjoyment out of reading Harry Harrison's "Stainless Steel Rat" books because they are well written innocent fun. But I am aware that that is all they offer, to relate them to reality would be ludicrous and totally missing the point of this type of novel. My main worry is that this type of novel is taking over a very large percentage of the science fiction being published. The most obvious example of this is 'Sword and Sorcery' fiction which has a huge section of the SF market, which is, after all, escapist fiction in its most pure form.)))

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I am writing to comment on your Editorial in Vector 111. I agree whole-heartedly that the current spate of SF films and some books are wishfullfilling flights of empty fantasy, but is that not what a section of the public want just now? They want to go to the cinema to see action and amazing special effects; and for a rare occasion, the whole family

can go as these films have no unnecessary sex and graphic violence (admittedly, the villains are shot with blasters, but the viewer does not have to witness the victims' intestines, or whatever, being layed out on the floor). For the two, or so, hours the viewers' worries are forgotten. The same applies to the novels - I use the term, novel, loosely! (((People like their killing neutralised.)))

Admittedly, they are narcotics, giving people the wrong view of SF at the same time, but they are corners to where some people can go and hide from the bad of the outside world. With all the doom and the gloom of present life the last thing they want to see or read is the plight of some poor citizen (A mirror of themselves) fighting to survive in, and trying to change, a society not too far removed from reality. What they want (crave?) is action and special effects to 'wow' to. If this involves adventures in 'outer space' so be it.

Another thing with the films and books is that one does not have to think to enjoy oneself. This, of course, is a very bad attitude to take, it is a very lazy attitude. However, this is the way things are, people want everything done for them, even if it involves sitting and watching a film, or reading a book, and letting everything unfold before them with the minimum possible use of the brain. It's now a case of 'quick-frozen, pop-it-in-the-oven-for-a-few-minutes-then-bingo, convenience entertainment', look how popular 'soaps' are on TV; the day of the Fahrenheit 451 parlour walls is not too far away!

I suggest that we, lovers of genuine SF, should ignore the blatantly commercial and bland. We should section ourselves off from the 'escapist SF' and concern ourselves with the 'Thinking SF'. We can't take what we like, and know to be good and worthwhile, and ram it down the throats of people who just do not want it.

In conclusion, isn't it better for some people to find escape and enjoyment from pure, empty fantasy, than resorting to drink or drugs. There will always be a need for escape, and these films are getting people back to the cinemas, which cannot be all bad.

In your editorial, what you're describing is, as I'm sure you're aware, no new thing - in fact the same description would apply even more validly to the SF of the early part of the Golden Age, if not the whole of the so-called Golden Age, out from which New Wave grew. It's just a passing phrase, as that (the former, not the latter) was and I'm sure there is going to be, once again, an equal and opposite reaction. After all, there would have been no new wave, no Aldiss and all the others who grew from New Worlds, if there hadn't been the establishment of the Golden Age to kick against.

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There's always been this 'commercial' element to SF, the only time to start worrying is when it's the only element. All the while we have people like Tiptree, LeGuin, Priest, Tuttle, Evans, Holdstock etc... there's hope. What this new aspect is doing is adding another layer to the multi-decker sandwich - start worrying when it supplants rather than supplements the other ingredients.

In fact, I'm looking forward to more superficial SF, since the worse the present trend becomes, the greater will be the reaction against it and I'm anticipating a really exciting time in the near future when the revolution comes (once publishing economics get themselves straightened out). (((I think your last sentence hit the correct key; 'once publishing economics get themselves straightened out'. As far as SF goes, I wonder if they will ever get straightened out, or at least partly back to the system we had before the economic crisis. Before, we had at least half-a-dozen hardback publishers which between them

published a fair number of SF books. At present we only have Gollancz which is publishing a respectable number of books. During the next six months Sidgwick & Jackson are publishing One SF novel, when before they used to publish 5 or 6. Faber are only publishing One, and Hale, who, don't forget supply the libraries, are publishing 4, of which 2 are novelisations. They used to publish over 10. What is even more worrying is that out of the 17 novels (hardback) which I know are going to be published in the first six months of this year, only 5 are by British authors. 29% to be precise. I would suggest that the commercial element has already, except for a few (29%) exceptions, supplanted all other ingredients. For instance, even one of the authors you mentioned, Robert Holdstock, seems to have found it necessary to go outside the SF genre and write horror novels under the name Robert Faulcon. And who can blame him, if he found it easier to sell books in that genre, he does have a living to earn.)))

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My first encounter with the works of John Norman occurred around five years ago. A book entitled, Raiders of Gor caught my attention, not because of some 'soft-porn' cover, but rather because of its low

price. According to the publishing history it had been stuck in that shop for up to four years...

Not only did I admire the descriptive powers of the author, there was also something in his overall style of writing which made me wish to collect and read the whole series. I located the first of his works in the Gorean Cycle - again lacking an eye-catching cover, in fact it was quite a dull one! Over the next few years my collection gradually grew in number, and a pattern was becoming obvious. As the series progressed John Norman was featuring more and more sexual scenes in his work - those books printed after 1977 capitalised on this with semi-erotic covers which have found notoriety in this letter column. Eventually, I lost interest, feeling that Norman had trapped himself into a cliché-lined rut - I don't like reading cliché...

Aside from this however, of of the most annoying aspects of the series is the short-sightedness it has shown to be present in a vocal segment of the BSFA membership!

While the series has degenerated now, there was much to be found in favour of the earlier volumes. Agreed, they now carry inflammatory covers, but merely because the tail-end of the Gorean Cycle is offensive to many, the more worthy offerings should not be tarred with the same brush. They remain classic works of fantasy and I abhor the narrow-mindedness exhibited by anyone who judges a book by its cover. (((When the series first came out I tried a couple of the 'Gor' books but they were not really to my taste. It does seem that writers, like clothes, go in and out of fashion. At present Niven, Pournelle and Heinlein seem to be in disfavour; next season it could just as well be Pohl, Wolfe and whoever.. Whether this is due to the change in our culture, or that 'youth' despises the old, I've no idea.)))

While I can usually find few faults in Vectors reviews, I feel I should mention one tiny flaw in Ann Collier's report on The Best of Randall Garrett. Immediately following praise of Garretts Asimovian (?) pastiche 'No Connections' she goes on to disparage another story, 'The Best Policy', because of its assumption that a human is smarter than the technologically advanced aliens who capture him. What is missed here is the fact that 'The Best Policy' is another pastiche, this time of the stories of Eric Frank Russell, who spent most of the fifties writing a series of human superiority stories for Astounding/Analog, presumably at John W. Campbells request. Both of these stories plus several other pastiches and parodies are contained in Garrett's excellent collection Take-off,

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which has as far as I know only been published in an American edition. This collection also includes the incredible 'Back Stage Lensman' which should have won awards for humour in SF if any were available when it was published. (((Thank you for the interesting clarification.)))

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Your comment on SF writers moving into other genres/genre writers moving into SF intrigued me. I have a copy of a P.J. Farmer story which is basically a western published in an old copy of Argosy; I can remember from about 15 years ago reading a western novel by J.T. Edson which featured his hero encountering an old man and

young woman in a covered wagon who turn out to be survivors from a crashed spacecraft. As far as SF/Romantic novel fusion - well, I'm sure it has happened and I can think of a couple of borderline cases (i.e. Hilbert Schenk's At the Eye of the Ocean) but nothing definite, although surely the standard Mills & Boon plotline could be adapted to make the darkly handsome foreigner an off-worlder. Come to think of it, I'm sure a bit of research would dig up scenes in many Great SF Novels of our time which share features with other genres. Is SF a genre or is it a bastard offspring of several other genres - now there's a thesis for you! (((Kind of you to offer...)))

Ian Watson's article is the kind of thing which causes you to agree totally with the case he's making and then five minutes later start re-thinking. He's right, of course; it's so easy to see literature through the eyes of critics, and, given limited resources, I'd rather see someone like Ian Watson given the money to subsidize a novel than me being given the money to subsidize my thesis (for what it's worth, I'm not actually receiving any taxpayers money.) But what, I wonder slyly, if Ian (or anyone of comparable literary ability: I'm not sniping at him personally) wished to bring out a volume of non-fiction and I wanted to write the novel? Or in other words, criticism isn't necessarily totally parasitic; it can be fun to read and/or have something interesting or worthwhile to say. Am I better off expressing what I want to say by means of a "scholarly" study of an obscure 17th-century writer or by attempting to write a (no doubt) bad and derivative novel? Just a note of dissent, really, because I'm damned if I'm going to defend the "establishment", and I deplore the habit of making definitive judgements on living authors (all right, we all do it, but we run the risk of the author writing back and telling us just where we got our facts wrong!) from the safety of a university tenure. And that's the point, I think. Most major criticism comes from "university critics" who are paid to write; can I be really outrageous and wonder if giving support to a viewpoint which doesn't come from that clique (even if it may not be what the Arts Council actually meant) may not be a bad thing?

Benford's remarks on the differences between American SF and British SF are interesting. There are very distinct differences in style, approach and subject matter, quite apart from the fact that they are written in two different languages (vid. Oscar Wilde). The Americans have a lot to answer for. We were producing excellent SF before they even learnt to write....Then along came the Golden Age. Okay, maybe it was right for its time, and it did introduce thousands of people to the whole world of speculative fiction, but it screwed up British SF for decades (with very few honourable exceptions). The New Worlds crowd made an impressive and innovative attack on the spaceship western concept of SF, and that was fine; but that was the sixties, when everything was new and different and exciting. You only need to look at pop music and fashion (amongst many other things) to see what happened when the sixties came to an end in C. 1973. We still haven't shaken off the Golden Age completely.

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British SF is distinctive. Or should be. I would suggest that it is marked out by two characteristics in particular. 1. It has an inherent realism. These events can happen, and they can happen today, involving real people in realistic situations. Priest and Cowper are continuing this tradition; they are clearly closer to Wyndham, Orwell and Wells than they are to Asimov, Heinlein and Doc Smith. 2. It is better written. The blurring of boundaries between SF writers and mainstream writers is more apparent in Britain than in the states: Orwell, again, and Priest, and Angela Carter. People who are respected as damn good writers, first and foremost; the genre is secondary. Considering the greater amount of American SF, why can so few American SF novels be regarded as literature? - there is a far higher proportion in British SF. I don't think I'm being excessively chauvinistic, in its original sense, by believing this. I'm not saying that all British SF is better than all American SF; obviously we've produced some crap, and they've produced some masterpieces. But even the best of American SF often strikes me as artificial; I'm not able to forget that I'm reading a fictional construct; I'm not able to identify as readily with the characters and situations. Maybe it's just that I'm British. Or maybe, as well, British SF is in general quote better unquote than American.

Perhaps I ought to confess to Valerie Housden, and to Mark Hewett (Vector 110), and to you, Geoff, that my anti-award suggestion was made somewhat tongue-in-cheek. But I applaud Valerie's suggestion that the prize should be an elderly wet kipper. (Maybe that's what the animal liberation people should have sent to Maggie; much preferable to a letter-bomb.)

Ian Watson's piece was very interesting, and made a vital point extremely well, namely that it is the writers (without whom not only the critics, but the agents, publishers and booksellers would be out of a job) who get the short end of the stick. But was the first half of his article, albeit captivating and well-written, really apposite? Or is he auditioning for a job with Gardner's question time? (((I believe it was, and I expect he is! It would certainly improve it.)))

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Gregory Benford's appraisal of SF readers rang bells! Before going to school I used to come in from a paper-round and read E. R. Burrough's Martian adventures or an Asimov book... Then I bought Chris Priest's Indoctrinaire and at the time I didn't

appreciate writing style in SF - it just didn't zip along enough... It was some years, alas, before I bought The Space Machine and 'discovered' good SF writing (i.e. good writing which happens to concern SF).

There are storytellers, writers and authors. Storytellers do what their title says they do, with wonder; writers tell stories after a fashion - usually the current one - often sacrificing wonder and imagery for quantity of output and filthy lucre; authors write with feeling about people and places in stories. Now, it seems, one writer wishes it to be known that his work is more worthwhile than another author. Recently, the writer, J.T. Edson, sent a letter to The Daily Mail: "Herbert Kretzmer wrote: 'Barbara Cartland regularly outsells T.S. Eliot. But does anyone doubt who of the pair is the more worthwhile writer?'"

"I do not - and it isn't Mr Eliot," writes JT. "Not only does Ms Cartland produce books which give enjoyment and escapism to a vast number of people, it is writers of such popular fiction - including, to a lesser extent, myself - who provide the profits and allow publishers to bring out the minority interest works of Mr Eliot and his kind, whose appeal is mainly to the critics rather than the public."

Now this man purportedly writes SF as well as Westerns, sharing characters with P J Farmer (the latter seems to borrow characters from everybody). Can JT's conceit be believed, or is this one of his jokes? Dread thought: are the popular and mediocre intent on manning their gilded battlements, to spout their sheekle-oriented criteria?

Writing in *Death Rays* 5, Joseph Nicholas said, "Fiction is a form of art, and the purpose of art (all art) is to enhance our appreciation of life by calling our attention to and providing insights into aspects of it we might otherwise overlook, thus enabling us to understand our fellow beings and our world on a deeper, more intensive level." Poetry and prose fiction are individual views on readers and also on other writers, helping to view from a different perspective. It goes almost without saying that the fiction of Edson and Cartland reveal shallow artists, with little or no insight. My concern is that JT and many other popular writers believe their hype! Fine, they write popular escape clauses, but let us beware lest they begin convincing the world that they're writing modern art. (Happily, some days later a 17-year-old wrote to point out the silliness of Edson's claim: I wish I had, too.)

Yet fiction is not the only endangered species. You may have read in the *Sunday Times* a brief but alarming report about the Gablers. This husband and wife team have publicised their views on published material so effectively - and won so much public support - "that the Texas board of education has dropped several textbooks that have offended the Gablers' fundamentalist religious beliefs or their right-wing political attitudes. Publishers in the US have grumbled but pay attention for Texas is the nation's largest single textbook purchaser (\$60 million in 1982)." So the Gablers' censorship has considerable influences: "What some books are doing," says Norma Gabler, "is giving students ideas - and ideas will never do them as much good as facts." There, surely, is the scenario for a horrific SF story...

Benford's article on aliens and their depiction in SF reminded me of what I consider to be the best portrayal of "alien" intelligence I have ever come across. It is William Golding's The Inheritors a novel which views the world through the eyes of a Neanderthal Man named Lok. Golding realizes that the only way to gain our sympathy for this primitive, physically repulsive creature is to use his eyes and his other senses to show us the world as he sees it. This potentially disastrous technique works brilliantly in the hands of a novelist of Golding's calibre.

The advantages of using this technique when attempting to describe aliens are obvious, since it keeps us constantly aware of the strangeness and limitations of their minds while allowing the author to subtly show the true nature of the society the alien finds himself in. Golding uses the technique to project his vision of the corruption and "darkness" of mankind.

Of course, the technique has been used elsewhere in SF (Stranger in a Strange Land is an obvious example). Nevertheless, it has never been done as successfully as Golding does it or with a mind as essentially alien as that of Lok.

Moreover, I would claim that The Inheritors could easily be classed as SF, since it is based on anthropology while remaining primarily a work of intensely imaginative prose. It certainly satisfies all the criteria of first-class SF cited in your editorial in *Vector* 111. As Mark Kinkead-Weekes and Ian Gregor write in their book William Golding: A Critical Study (Faber and Faber, 1967, p69) "Isn't this science fiction if it is fiction at all; taking us backwards as space fiction takes us forwards, substituting Neanderthals for Martians, but giving us the same pleasure in the exotic, or the familiar seen through strange eyes." This quotation may reflect an over-limited view of SF on their part, but their basic point is perfectly sound.

I would recommend The Inheritors to anybody intrigued by Benford's article or, indeed, to anybody interested in William Golding's work. It is the best of Golding's novels, and has a poignancy and an allure unmatched in the vast majority of books.

By the way, it was nice to see two lengthy pieces both of which showed that it was possible to sustain interest over their whole length.

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I thought Vector 111 one of the most interesting issues I have read in a long time, but cannot resist commenting on some aspects of the Greg Benford 'double bill'.

First, the statement made in the opening paragraph of the interview; "the number of scientists who have actually written SF is extremely small, and their works

for the most part have been rather unmemorable." What is a scientist? If we define the word as meaning someone with a science degree or its equivalent, working in some scientific field, hundreds or thousands of them have actually written SF. Is this an "extremely small" number?

The second part of the statement carries more insinuation than information. (After all, the works of most writers of all kinds have been "rather unmemorable.") The suggestion seems to be that a scientific training almost disqualifies a person from writing well. If it does, how does it do this? It somehow extinguishes any pre-existing literary talent? Need I say more, to show that someone has dropped a clanger?

The statement: "His claim (Greg Benford's) that science is, in a sense, central to science fiction provoked disagreement from some members of the audience..." struck me as very funny, but I suppose it was not funny, really. It's not very different from "War is Peace" and "Freedom is Slavery" in 1984 to find fault with such statements of the obvious. It seems to me that many modern writers would like to pretend that SF has little or nothing to do with science so as to write whatever they like and still call it science fiction. I agree with Greg Benford that many so-called SF writers, like Mike Moorcock, are ignorant of science and reluctant to find out about it. I see much evidence of a "class voice" in British SF - another of Benford's suggestions that apparently "provoked immediate dissension." On the other hand, I was dismayed to learn that he and other US writers are able to keep on re-writing the same SF novel or short story and getting the "new, improved" product published (cf. Britain). And what on earth does he mean about having "a pretty much unreconstructed interest in what is real" and being "unreconstructedly scientific"? Is "unreconstructed" one of the latest US 'buzz' words? ((("Unreconstructed" according to my Oxford English Dictionary is a fairly recent word first seen in print on 25 March 1869. Although, having seen its definition in the dictionary, I'm still convinced that it should not exist!)))

I started reading Aliens and Knowability: A Scientist's Perspective with great interest, thinking it would contain some genuine scientific and philosophical meat and an original idea or two, but the author seemed more anxious to impress than to apply his mind to the subject. He waffled and talked down to the audience, as in the statement: "Alas, like most authors, I am notoriously poorly read", as if addressing people who will know no better, and to whom 'authors' (of what?) are a strange species. Other specimens of fuzzy reasoning and poor expression in the article convey to me that Greg may be a brilliant plasma physicist but "like most scientists" is unable to carry over scientific habits of thought into fields outside his specialty. The question of the possible nature of extra-terrestrial life can best be approached in two ways (a) analytically, and (b) comparatively, and Greg tries neither approach. There is no such thing as 'the alien' he writes of as a single entity: there will be many different kinds of alien. The question of 'knowability' can hardly be discussed seriously without some reference to the ideas of Chomsky and Willard Quine (of Harvard University), neither of whose names Greg Benford mentions. (((It's strange, I did not get the impression that he was talking down to his audience at all.)))

I thought I would make a few comments on the Gregory Benford interview in Vector 111. I read this with interest, though he makes one point which I should like to challenge. He comments that thirty years of radio astronomy has done more to understand the nature of the universe than philosophy or theology. That is true, but he has assumed that the

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purpose of science and theology are identical, which they are not. Theology does not attempt to explain how the universe operates any more than science attempts to explain why, i.e. It makes no attempt to explain the physical processes behind the origin of destiny of the universe, but the spiritual dimension which science cannot reach. One cannot, after all, analyse an emotion such as love in a laboratory but its existence is not questioned.

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After reading the material by Angela Carter in Vector, I went to a library surplus book sale and was amazed to find a mint hardcover copy of The Passion of New Eve! I read the novel, and agree with Eve Harvey that much of it resembles Ballard in its often dry, clinical style,

and the sort of grotesque images it focuses upon. I was rather surprised by its erotic sexuality. Although its not a book I would be likely to reread (my 'ultimate' test for a book's quality and durability), it really was enjoyable and different. I now have another writer's career I will want to follow.

The material on and by Gregory Benford in Vector 111 is quite interesting. "Alas, like most authors, I am notoriously poorly read," he says. I didn't know that was common of authors, but I suppose it makes sense: they spend the time writing that most of us spend reading. He also says: "I'm in favour of..... realistic narratives, so that you get the feeling that this is actually the way it might happen, as contrasted to stories where you think, This is not the way it would happen." I really enjoy some of the near-future novels and stories such as Timescape or Watson's The Martian Inca in which the brush with the future is so close and the informational noise so consistent that it is convincing and believable, and the novel or story goes on to have some value beyond a literary or entertainment value (not that these are in any sense unimportant). This gives SF some extra importance. But there is a lot of SF that is set so far away from the present that it really seems hard to say how things might happen, or how characters would react: there are so many alternatives. Even a novel such as The Dispossessed seems so far away in space and time that it seems impossible to judge "realistically" or in any other way than as a story. (((Surely, basic human nature has not, and will not change.)))

(((As you know Paperback Inferno does not, at present, have a regular letter column and therefore, letters to PI have sometimes appeared in Vector's letter column. With letters on Vector 111 I received four letters on PI which made similar points which Joseph and I felt deserved a decent response. Therefore, the letters of Paul Brazier, Kenneth Lake, Ethel Lindsay and Lisa Tuttle have been passed over to Joseph and will appear in a special letter column in PI. I hope that this is satisfactory to all.

Which brings me to the last couple of letters. Bruce Gillespie writes in to say that he has at last managed to get the first year of SF Commentary reprinted. It runs to over 200,000 words and includes pieces by Lem, Dick, Aldiss, Brunner, Delany, Foyster, Turner, Harding, Bangsund and Broderick. The price is £25 per copy and available from Bruce at GPO Box 5195AA, Melbourne, Vic. 3001, Australia. Alex Wallace says that he would like to see a rebuttal of Algis Budrys article in the January 83 issue of F&SF. If anyone wishes to volunteer please write. Harold Powell asks if Vector can run two reviews of the same book. We can, but it is a dangerous play as you could end up with two identical reviews. Which would be a bit boring to read. But I'll give it a go... Paul Dembina comments on the view that any method of getting people to read Philip K. Dick is justified, but wonders if it will have any long term advantages. Lastly, Mike Lewis asks what percentage of the BSFA membership writes into Vector. Not enough, not enough....)))

(((Only a couple of letters have arrived on Vector 112, so I've decided to keep them over to next issue. See you then.)))

From what cause I will not bother to go into, I regularly receive batches of Irish newspapers. These often - nearly always, in fact - have an unintentionally comical aspect and should be required reading for those among us who imagine the Irish joke is an English invention. Slightly bizarre, from the English point of view, is the religious content, which these days - even Ireland having now failed to hold back the tide of prurience - is sometimes forced to exist jowl by cheek (in that order) with full-colour photos of naked girls.

One such religious columnist is Friar D'Arcy, who recently devoted his page to a sermon on the practice of taping pop music from the radio instead of going out and buying the record.

This practice, the good friar warned his readers, breaks the eighth commandment. It is definitely theft. It robs artists and record companies of their earnings and creates unemployment.

It would be evil to speculate on what friends or acquaintances Friar D'Arcy might have in the popular music industry. We all know that the private and also the pirated taping of music and now video has been of concern to copyright holders for some time, so much that music companies have tried to persuade the government to put a tax on blank tapes, the revenue to be turned over directly to them as compensation for their losses. They also play the ethical card. Why not? Patriotism may be the last refuge of the scoundrel; what is certain is that the ethical plea has been the first resort of every scoundrel great and small.

A broadly similar piece of villainy, one that does not even have copyright law to back it, has succeeded on the part of a guild of British writers, who have persuaded parliament to introduce what is called Public Lending Right. The argument goes like this: authors are being robbed because public libraries buy books and then lend them to lots of people to read. A book should only be read by the person who buys it (this isn't stated nearly so baldly, of course). Therefore authors should be compensated...it is unfortunate for the music companies that so few MPs are pop singers. The fact is that this sort of thing is an old, old, old story. Adam Smith wrote about it in *Wealth of Nations*: 'Rarely do people of the same occupation gather together, even if only for merriment, that it does not end in some plot to defraud the public.' Mostly these schemes must either ignore, in their greed, or else try to circumvent, one of the most tested laws of exchange economics: that the more a thing costs the less of it will be bought. Since this law will not be broken, the conspiracies are apt to come a cropper.

In the present case, the circumvention takes the form of having the paymaster a government department, not the public libraries themselves. We shall see how long that lasts.

The reason why I mention all this is that Friar D'Arcy's intimations of sin got me thinking about that peculiar convention of our modern civilisation: legal ownership of intangibles. Until a couple of hundred years or so ago (I'm poor with dates) there was no such thing. Ownership meant ownership of something having mass and substance. An author owned a literary work of his, for instance, only while he had possession of the manuscript! Once a publisher had issued it, any other publisher was at liberty to copy it and issue his own edition, so that if a book proved popular rival editions were apt to hit the street with alacrity. Until, that is, certain parties found a way to protect their expectations of profit, again with the help of friends in parliament.

When you think about it, and leaving 'ethics' aside for the moment, legal claim to intangibles is a pretty odd thing. It is rather as if I thought up a particularly good joke and told it to you. Later on I came across you telling the same joke to a third party. "Stop!" I thunder. "That is my joke you are telling! You will hear from my solicitor in the morning."

Or imagine that I once wrote and had published a story all copies of which have since perished. I can't even remember it myself properly. The only true record that exists is in the mind of a deluded science fiction reader who thought it a fabulous story and memorised it word for word.

In law, I own what is in his head. If he wants to set it down on paper, he may not publish copies of it without my permission.

What, then, is the ethics of copyright? That's what I've been trying to explain: there isn't any, it's only a convention. And I haven't much doubt that it is a doomed convention.

To go back to Friar D'Arcy's music tapes, why is it that the law of copyright has held up pretty well for literature for centuries, but is already crumbling for recorded music? It is simply because copying a book, by whatever method, is still an expensive procedure. But attempting to maintain sound copyright in a world of ubiquitous cassette recorders flies straight in the face of the fundamental law of exchange economics.

This law may be expressed as follows: whatever I pay you to provide me with a good or service must have less value to me than the effort of providing it for myself.

If I have worked all day to earn £20, and we are sitting at table together, it is unlikely I would accede to your demand for my £20 if you are to pass me the salt, when it lies only a few inches beyond my reach. (I say 'unlikely' in deference to the calculus of probabilities. In my case the probability is not vanishingly small; it is classically zero.)

Makers of music tapes are said to be seeking a way of putting a signal on the tapes that makes them uncopyable. I have not heard that they have succeeded, and if they do a countering filter will not be long in coming. Producers of software for home computers, which at present is also on tape cassette, face the same problem. Some of the mushrooming software businesses use various tricks, such as disabling the Break key, arranging for the program to wipe itself out if Save is entered, etc., to prevent their programs being saved from RAM. There is a tape on sale in the USA which tells you how to get round these measures. Other firms don't bother, and indeed it is quite futile if they buyer has some decent recording equipment; he can just copy the tape.

So in these spheres ownership of intangible 'creative work' is already unenforceable, whatever the law says, and will likely die the death. After all, why is it that you can patent an invention but not a philosophical idea or the discover of a physical law? Just as much mental labour might be involved, and just as much originality. The answer is simply, how would you enforce it?

On the premise that graphic reproduction will eventually go the way of sound reproduction, i.e. it will become easy and cheap and available to all, the same is due to happen to literary copyright.

It's a-coming, boys! You'd better get used to it!

Good heavens! Does this mean writers won't make anything out of what they write? Then there won't be any writers! After all, a neighbourhood friend insists on informing me that I only became a writer with the intention of writing a 'best-seller' and becoming a millionaire. (If a person like myself mixes with the common folk he discovers a curious fable. Painters are all penniless, struggling bohemians. But writers are all wealthy, suave men-about-town, living 'the hoi loife'. People get confused on having me pointed out. I am not a person to whom one automatically touches one's forelock. But I should be. Something is wrong.)

It's useless to argue. "You are absolutely right, sir!" I sententiously tell my friend, and quoting Dr Johnson, "No one but a fool ever wrote, except for money!" And donning my clown's nose, I blow soap bubbles at him.

Yes, there is always going to be a living for writers. The consequence of the above is that a book, whether incarnated in ink and paper, laser disk, silicon, gallium arsenide, memory bubbles, or War and Peace encoded in DNA, will cost more than the blank on which it is inscribed, but not so much more that it would be worth your while to borrow a copy and duplicate it. Whatever deal authors and publishers make with one another will have to take cognisance of that. I expect authors will still be able to demand royalties. Whether an author will be able to become stinking rich, as a few now can, I don't know. What does it matter? It isn't necessary to the continuance of civilisation for writers and pop singers to be paid like film stars, or for the film stars to be paid like film stars.

(Of course, I am over-simplifying. There can be other considerations that make people willing to pay more for a bought copy - better quality, the

desire for an original edition, etc. Then again, some people think the 'incarnation' substance will disappear from the market place altogether, and you'll pay a small sum to have a book piped into your files as data down the telephone. Well, maybe.)

For the products of literary effort to become public property the moment it is open to view might seem a little weird; but only if one is in a culture bind. New technology - the printing press - led to the devising of copyright, and newer technology is going to eradicate it. As it is I have heard that the communist world disallows copyright on principle; and the communists are right, because in the long term intangible wealth is wealth released into the nōosphere, available 'to each according to his need', put there 'from each according to his ability' - controlling it is like trying to control air (remember Ron Hubbard's The Great Air Monopoly?).

The only way to keep private possession of it is to keep it secret. And that, in the philosophical sphere, is just what used to happen long ago. Societies such as the Pythagorean Society, and probably others we've never even heard of, were repositories of knowledge and ideas that were kept under tight security for centuries. That we know as much of Pythagorean doctrine as we do is chiefly thanks to a certain Philolaus, who so the story goes published an account of it because he needed money (it is believed to have become the source book of Plato's The Timaeus).

All this secrecy must have held back civilisation considerably. Material of this kind needs to be aired and circulated if there is to be progress - the surviving fragments of Pythagoreanism, for instance, led directly to the achievements of Kepler and Newton.

So what has all this got to do with science fiction? Well, if I need an excuse for this article maybe it's because I think science fiction is more nōospheric than other fiction. Crude though it often is, it's the mythology of our age, like the mythologies of tribes, their mental dimension - such as the fables of the Kalahari bushmen, a stone-age people in the last stages of being ground into eradication between the iron-making black barbarians from the north and the machine-gun wielding white barbarians entering from the south, yet whose myths contain such insight that one is dumbfounded to know where they came from.

Widen the view yet further. Psychologists have expressed wonderment at the way a human being can learn a language in the first few years of its life. Every sentence that is strung together is an act of creation, they say. In learning the secrets of its construction, every two-year-old is acting like a genius.

Identifying the reason for this 'amazement' can tell us a great deal about the early beginning of the 'nōosphere', if I may continue to use that jokey word. Language reflects the power of thought: the power to place facts in relation to one another, to test for validity, to arrive at new relations by experiment. The last is what we call 'creative thought'.

We can all talk, but even the better among us employ the power of thought but rarely. G B Shaw was not joking when he quipped: "Most people think once or twice in a lifetime. I have made myself an international reputation by thinking once a week."

We have thoughts. But to have a thought is not thinking: it is to thinking what an animal's ability to make noises is to human speech. Thinking means stringing thoughts together correctly and carefully, in such a manner as to elucidate some aspect of the world. And yet, we know that the power to think is part of the brain's hardware, just like the power of speech, in me as much as in Einstein. So why is it so little used? Because (a) it takes a certain kind of effort, and (b) we can get along without it.

What I am talking about hasn't much to do with IQ. What 'intelligence tests' measure are aptitudes. Thinking is a function. A slow-witted, gormless-seeming nerd of low IQ can be better at thinking than a high IQ smart-ass who cottons on to everything in a trice and passes all his exams with a smug smile on his face. (Do I sound hostile? It's because I answer to the first description.)

But consider for a moment. An organ evolves only if it confers some benefit

on its owner. Why do we have these marvellous brains, when we seem incapable of using them?

The answer should be fairly obvious. The nōosphere uses them. In the first place, we think in bits and pieces here and there and society puts the thoughts together eventually. Secondly, if only one individual in a thousand, or a million, or a thousand million, stretches his mental capacity to the utmost and communicates the results to the others, there is survival value to the group in having the other one-thousand-million-minus-one unused genius-type brains.

But wait. Go back to the beginning. How did this brain evolve in the first place? In creatures that made no use of it? Hardly.

Imagine back to the emergence of the hominids. The brain would not have stabilised in its present form except by use. But remember that the evolving species was small in numbers, leaving little room for the large-scale mental redundancy of modern man. It had only rudimentary language. And it had no material for the automatic association of thoughts that passes for thinking among us: no accumulated knowledge, no backlog of ideas.

Conclusion: our primitive ancestors must have been our mental superiors. Typically, they were geniuses. True, their mental capacity was smaller than ours, their facility with thought unpracticed, their IQs low, even lower than mine. But they used what they had, at full stretch. Their efforts bootstrapped our neocortex into existence.

The above scenario helps make some questions more explicable. Such as the existence of religion, which is so persistent it must be in our genes somewhere. It was part of our evolution...

Skip back over the millions of years, for another look at the question of ownership of intangibles. Pythagoras is most famous for having investigated the properties of sound vibrations. Two and a half thousand years were to pass before this investigation was taken up again: by the inventor Nikola Tesla.

Tesla was a sort of science fictional superman, a true inheritor of our primeval ancestors, a man who did force the power of his thought to the utmost. Though he experimented with sound, his chief interest lay in the vaster range of electrical vibrations. He was the inventor of the polyphase system of AC current which is the basis of power transmission today, and which made possible the AC motor, previously thought impossible.

Tesla licenced his invention to an industrialist called Morgan for one million dollars plus a royalty on the horsepower developed. Tesla's biographer relates that the time came when Morgan's accountants told him he had given Tesla too much; he would have to ask him to negotiate another deal.

Under protest, Morgan did so. "And if I agree," Tesla said, "will you continue to develop the polyphase system?"

"I shall continue trying to develop the system whatever happens," Morgan told him.

"Giving my polyphase system to mankind means more to me than any amount of money," Tesla said. And he tore up his contract before Morgan's eyes.

He was tearing up, at the very least, eight million dollars. Alas, he was later to become secretive with his prodigious inventiveness, recording nothing on paper but committing everything to his perfect memory, not even telling his workmen the exact nature of the projects they worked upon. It's said he intended eventually to make more millions from the patents. When he died in 1943 he possibly took with him details of a laser device able to project energy in any amount in a beam a tiny fraction of a millimetre in diameter (he lectured on the problem of generating coherent light in the 1890s), and a practicable system of broadcast power transmission that could be tapped anywhere on the earth's surface. At any rate he died with more knowledge of electricity than any man before him or probably since. But he made the same mistake the Pythagoreans made. He kept it as his private property, and now no one has it.

BOOK REVIEWS

PET SUBJECT

JUDITH HANNA

(THE DESTROYERS OF LAN-KERN by PETER TREMAYNE. Methuen 1982, 183pp., £6.95)

According to the jacket's rear flap, Peter Tremayne is the pseudonym for a man who, under his own name, is "an expert on Celtic history and culture.... author of the definitive history of the Cornish language and its literature". The front flap outlines the plot: this is the second volume of a "stunning Celtic fantasy trilogy" about a twentieth century botanist, Dryden, who has found himself transported - not by magic but by being caught in cryogenic suspension in a submarine under the Arctic ice-cap after a nuclear accident - to a post-Destruction future inhabited by reconstructed ancient Celts and fascist Saxons. Dryden is seeking (a) a beautiful Celtic maiden, Kigva, and (b) a magic object, An Kevryn. The cover illustration is yet another gratuitously sexist, not-much-to-do-with-the-story, air-brushed abomination.

Given Tremayne's credentials, as quoted above, one might expect this to be a story written, like Tolkiens', mainly to show off an impeccably worked out linguistic and cultural background. But it will not bear comparison with Tolkien, for not only is Destroyers of Lan-Kern excruciatingly wooden in style and dreadfully predictable in action, the linguistic background itself is also implausible. Tolkien, plundering old legends, sensibly set his stories even further back in musty antiquity; Tremayne, plundering the same, by now much-looted, old legendry, has shot it all forward into the future.

"Scyttan up!", "Up standan!", "Hwaet!" his See-ti Saxon guards shout at their prisoners; inflexions dropped from English eight centuries ago have crept back in, along with old English spelling - about as likely as Homo sapiens evolving back to Homo neanderthalis. "Shuddup!", "Stannup!" and "Huh!" seem more likely descendants of current English speech patterns. But then, Tremayne's plonking dialogue suggests that, however much he knows about philology, the archaeology of language, he has few clues about how people actually talk. While it is plausible that an English-speaking society could survive in a seven-level underground city and develop a fascist social order, it's hardly likely that such a society would be so overcome by antiquarian fervour that they not only decided to call their leaders "thegns" and "eorls" but also to recast their whole language and spelling system. "Aelmigtig!"

And what about the Celtic barbarians who roam the surface of Lan-Kern? ("Kern" is "Kernow", Cornwall, but what of "Lan", which also appears in "Lan-Howlek", settlement of one of the tribes of Lan-Kern: is it the Welsh "llan", a churchyard, a settlement, or a corruption of the English "land"?). Is it possible that all those living on the surface should come to speak a Celtic tongue? Not impossible, but unlikely. If they did, how would the Celtic culture have evolved? Would it really be a culture that, again, was so overcome with antiquarian enthusiasm that they call themselves by names taken from the twelfth century Mabinogion? Pryderi, a young "drewyth" (druid: an idea kept alive by antiquarian mysticism in our present), is Dryden's companion, and Dryden is in love with his sister, Kigva; Peredur, killed at the end of the earlier volume, was Pryderi's

brother, and Mabon, another casualty, was the chief "drewyth". In the old legends, Kigva ("flesh") was the wife of Pryderi ("anxiety"), Peredur was the Welsh original of the Arthurian Perceval, the simpleton who found the Grail, and Pryderi and Peredur may be variants of the same name - traditionally, both act rather golemish and were connected with a magic bowl. Mabon fab Modron ("Son son of Mother"), identified with the Romano-British god Maponos worshipped at Hadrian's Wall, appears in Cwlhwch And Olwen. These are all Welsh, not Cornish, legends; for an expert on Cornish literature, Tremayne has made little use of his net subject.

Antiquarian enthusiasm has produced some excellent fantasy - Tolkien's stories, T H White's The Once and Future King - but in itself it is insufficient to produce even passable fantasy. Dotting in evocative names and spots of more or less etymologically consistent languages does not make up for lifeless writing and the fundamental logical flaw of totally ignoring the crucial fact that it is from the present, not from a past long dead, that the future must evolve.



METAPHYSICAL GRAFFIFI

BRIAN SMITH

[illegible]

(RADIX by A.A. ATTANASIO. Corqi 1982, 384pp., £2.95

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Whomsoever is responsible for the packaging of Radix shows absolutely no consideration whatsoever for my blood pressure. Here, we are told, is A A Attanasio, "the most talented new writer since Frank Herbert", whose novel "offers a complete world... not since Tolkien's Middle Earth has a complete world of the imagination been so brilliantly realised." Hype might well sell books, but it plays hell with my objectivity. The purpose of these glowing paeans is to draw the reader's attention to the fact that Attanasio has written an epic, about 190,000 words by my estimate.

Some fourteen hundred years from now, a massively transformed Earth has been irradiated for over a millenium by the Line, a stream of extra-universal energy emerging from a black hole at the centre of the galaxy. Earth's magnetic field has gone, the skies are filled with permanent aurorae, coastlines are almost unrecognisable, and massive storms ravage the surface. In common with plant and animal life, most of humanity is genetically twisted. In the repressive Masseboth Protectorate, homeland of protagonist Sumner Kagan, both human distorts and the voors, telephathic aliens who have ridden the Line to Earth, are ruthlessly hunted down and exterminated. As the story opens, Kagan is a vicious, maladjusted teenager whose idea of overcoming his personal inadequacies is to set up lethal ambushes for street gangs. When the law finally catches up with him, Kagan is swallowed by the brutal Masseboth penal system. After a spell in a logging camp, he is recruited into the Rangers, an elite army unit, to be trained in ever more ascetic mental and physical disciplines. His service with the Rangers ends when he is possessed by Corby, his voor son. Joining a distort tribe, he is freed from Corby's control, and learns that he is the eth, the alter ego of the Delph, a godmind who has existed since the fall of our civilisation, twelve hundred years before. It is the destiny of the eth to destroy the Delph, but Kagan is not the first. There have been many eths over the centuries, and all have been killed by the agents of the Delph.

The reference to Frank Herbert, cited above, is not entirely inappropriate, since his influence is evident throughout. Immortal godminds, massive intelligence, the transformation of man into superman, even the extensive use of desert locations - familiar Herbert themes and devices abound, although Attanasio can leave even Herbert standing when it comes to opaque philosophy. In fact, very

little in *Radix* is particularly original. Strong overtones of Zelazny are also evident, and other details carry the stamp of *deja vu*; does not the increase of human intelligence due to cosmic irradiation precisely invert the premise of Poul Anderson's first novel? Admittedly, Attanasio uses black hole theory so new that Larry Niven has yet to write a Hugo-winning story based upon it, but it seems to have been lifted out of something like *Scientific American*, then laid down in huge, impenetrable slabs ("... the internal five-dimensional curved Riemannian manifold whose isometry boundary is the external, gravitational universe"), and then used with some licence. I make no claim to be an authority on extreme-case Kerr singularities, but Attanasio's use of them, and his grasp of celestial dynamics in general, seems somewhat questionable.

This is perhaps not unexpected, given Attanasio's thoroughly arts-based academic background. His career is clearly laid out: University of Pennsylvania, M.F.A. in creative writing from Columbia University, M.A. in linguistics from NYU. And, reading between the lines, Attanasio seems to spring from a school of thought which holds that great writers are made, not born, and that literary masterpieces can be rolled out on a production line, provided that you use the correct blueprints. Attanasio's blueprint calls for an immensely ornate, almost rococo prose, thick with metaphor and imagery. He teeters along a thin and slippery tightrope above a purple pool, and frequently gets his feet wet. For example,

"Thunder trundled out of the south, expanded to a roar, and ripped the sky above them with a scream wider than ears could hold."

or

"Wheeling slowly, far, far out, were the giant spirals calling from beyond the golden sadsome blur at the rim of seeing. Light longer than under-standing funneled out of that sun shining in the all-darkness, singing the immeasurable praise of creation; birthdeath, darkness eating itself into light."

and my personal favourite,

"Darkness flew by like howling apes..."

a noble example of that species of image once described by Kingsley Amis, "which at first seems to mean almost nothing, and upon reflection and reconsideration is seen to mean almost nothing." Attanasio is also a dab hand with the bolt-on simile. Smoke is particularly favoured, being sometimes silent, and sometimes - lean? I think that if Attanasio has the eye of the poet, then he must keep it preserved in a jar of formaldehyde.

I cannot recommend this book; it is prolix, self-indulgent and far too long. Of course, there is no intrinsic reason why a story of one man's spiritual evolution should be especially fast moving, but Attanasio is not one to advance his plot when he can overwrite his way through yet another bout of literary flower arranging. Kagan is the single connecting thread running through the entire novel, and even that thread becomes rather frayed about one third of the way through, when Kagan undergoes a complete personality change, which leads to a schizophrenic sensation of there being two different characters with the same name. Attanasio does not seem to be a science fiction writer *per se*; rather, he is a writer who decided to write a successful science fiction novel, and picked the Herbert epic as being the most likely format, which lends *Radix* a somewhat contrived and artificial flavour. Even the appendices are far too similar to those in *Dune* to be mere coincidence - biographical sketches of the major characters, written with historical hindsight, and a glossary. The latter is absolutely vital, for no self-respecting epic is ever without its brain-numbing profusion of slang, technical terms and cross-references, on the grounds that the best way to suspend disbelief is to bludgeon it from a place of concealment.

Radix would seem to be Attanasio's first novel, and I cannot really forecast from it what he might achieve in the future. He produces a number of good inventive touches, and his writing is quite effective in its more restrained moments; but unless he can curb his vaulting ambition, and refrain from his wilder stylistic excesses, then reading his work will continue to be like trying to count sheep in the middle of a blizzard.

COMMUNICATION PROBLEMS

GERAINT DAY

(1983 YEARBOOK OF ASTRONOMY edited by PATRICK MOORE. Sidgwick and Jackson 1983)
 (256pp., £4.95.)

This series of yearbooks of astronomy has become an institution. It began in 1962, and for most of the time has been edited by another institution: Patrick Moore, presenter of BBC Television's The Sky at Night (which itself has been running since 1957). Very many people have been turned onto astronomy and space by Patrick Moore, myself included. There are many newer authors about, but many of those were first interested in the stars by one of Patrick Moore's works.

Each Yearbook of Astronomy sets out brief details of the night sky month-by-month, with accompanying star charts (for users in the northern and southern hemispheres), notes on particularly interesting phenomena, positions of the planets, eclipses of the Sun and Moon, and so on. There are also short notes devoted to a specific topic in each monthly section, such as the centenary of the birth of some astronomer or the history of the observation of a double star. Using the succinct information given, it is fairly easy to find, say, Saturn or the Orion constellation, but to get the fullest possible use it is best to have access to two other publications with which Patrick Moore is now associated: The Handbook of The British Astronomical Association (he's now President of that Association) and Norton's Star Atlas and Reference Handbook (which he edits in conjunction with others - the book is now in its seventeenth edition and has a much longer history than these yearbooks). In this way, it's easier to make use of the lists of nebulae and double stars given at the back of the Yearbook.

Along with the star maps and monthly notes and so on is a list of UK astronomical societies, but this list is seldom accurate. This is the fault not of the editor or the publishers but of lazy club secretaries - on the last page there's always a plea from the publishers asking for people to let them know of any errors or omissions.

There is another part to these yearbooks. Each year, there is an article section, covering a wide range of astronomical topics (I wrote one for the 1982 edition - does that mean I'm biased?). This year, we are presented with eight pieces on (in order) black holes and quasars, the European Space Agency's mission to study the comet Halley, the rotation of the planet Uranus, Mars's two satellites, craters on Mercury and Mars, measuring the astronomical unit (the mean distance of the Earth from the bright yellow thing occasionally seen in British daytime skies), building a special set-up for photographing meteors, and "At The Faintest Limits" - an article about extracting the maximum amount of information from dim objects observed by one of the biggest optical telescopes on Earth. Oddly, we don't get an article billed on the back cover, "Diary of an Observational Astronomer"; something obviously went wrong in communication between planning and printing, and I suppose it will turn up in next year's Yearbook of Astronomy.

The articles are written by a mixture of professional and amateur astronomers, which doesn't mean that the "professional" stuff is incomprehensible except to the initiated. In fact, Dr David Allen's "At The Faintest Limits" gives a very clear picture of recent goings-on at (as they say) the frontiers of science; by contrast, Dr J A M McDonnell's article on the Halley's comet mission is more technically worded. But, although the articles can't be guaranteed to offer something for every star-gazer, they come pretty close to it.

If you're into astronomy and a fan of the yearbooks then you'll probably have bought a copy of this edition. If not, then you can get in one volume all the sort of stuff that, for instance, The Daily Telegraph prints in its monthly

"night sky" spots. But you also get the bonus, naturally at a price, of some more reading matter. If you want to know what that bright red blob in the night sky is then the Yearbook of Astronomy, while not giving you an instant answer, can certainly point the way to it. After all, if SF is supposed to be that space opera stuff then it's surely right and proper that SF readers should be able to find their way around the universe, even without the aid of a certain hitchhiker's guide.

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BOSS FALCO RULES O.K.

GRAHAM ANDREWS

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(THE EYE OF THE HERON by URSULA LE GUIN. Gollancz 1982, 122pp., £6.95)

"A small colony huddles in a tiny corner of the almost unexplored continent America. But it is a colony divided between the tough inhabitants of Virginia City and the gentle townfolk of Ponderosa, on whose hard work and ingenuity the citizens depend. The Ponderosa people want to move away and start a new colony elsewhere, but they are frustrated by their neighbours under Boss Falco. Only Falco's daughter, Luz, is sympathetic, and later joins them."

No, the above quotation has not been taken from the blurb for yet another sagebrush saga by J T Edson or Brian Garfield. It has, in fact, been lifted almost verbatim from the flap of Ursula LeGuin's The Eye of the Heron.

Blurbs are usually pernicious little things, but - in this case at least - the blurb is the book. I have deleted the word "human", substituted "Virginia City" for "Victoria City" and "Ponderosa" for "Shantih", but it's more than enough to reveal this novella for what it really is - a space opera.

Not that there is anything wrong with space opera per se. When it is good it can be very, very good: Leigh Brackett, Murray Leinster and Jack Vance, among others, have proved that time and again. But when it is bad, it is horrid - almost everything by Alan Dean Foster and Stephen Goldin, for instance.

Damon Knight once described the worst kind of space opera as belonging to the "call a rabbit a smearp" school of SF writing. In the December 1967 Australian Science Fiction Review, the Antipodean critic John Foyster made use of a story by Mark Reinsberg entitled "The Three Thieves of Japetus" to demonstrate Knight's thesis in action; the piece, which was - and is - hilarious, was reprinted in More Issues at Hand, by "William Atheling, Jnr". And, in space opera terms, The Eye of the Heron is a smearp - not as bad as, say, Stephen Goldin's The Scavenger Hunt, but nowhere near as good as, say, Leigh Brackett's The Sword of Rhiannon. Word for word, sentence by sentence, paragraph after paragraph, it conforms to the usually high LeGuin standards of composition and clarity - but is nevertheless full of smearps.

The book's opening paragraph is short and to the point:

"In the sunlight in the centre of a ring of trees Lev sat cross-legged, his head bent above his hands."

But the second paragraph begins:

"A small creature crouched in the warm, shallow cup of his palms. He was not holding it; it had decided or consented to be there. It looked like a little toad with wings...."

And so on for another 250-odd words, describing how the aforesaid creature, chameleon-like, changes its texture before flying off "in a long effortless glide toward a sunlit slope beyond the ring of trees". Cute, eh? It doesn't help that the toad-things are called "wotsits", and the second paragraph is typical of the book as a whole. It's all right for those who like Disneyish "ooh-ah", but for the rest of us....

The above-mentioned Lev is the leader of an exploration team which has been seeking a suitable colony-site for prospective emigrants from Victoria City and/or Shantih. After (one supposes) many adventures, he and his team have succeeded in finding such a place, and are heading back to Shantih to report their discovery. (Daniel Boone, eat your heart out.) And, back at Shantih, Lev describes this "promised land" to his father, Sasha, as:

"A river valley. Five kilos from the sea. Everything we need. And beautiful - the mountains above it - range behind range, higher and higher, higher than the clouds, whiter - you can't believe how high you have to look to see the highest peaks."

It's just like something out of National Geographic, only much less informative.

In due course, Boss Falco arrives at the Shantih Meeting House to "present the congratulations of the Government of Victoria to these brave explorers". He goes on to say that Lev's maps and reports will be valuable additions to the Archives of the State of Victoria City and that plans for a limited migration of farmers and manual workers are being considered by the Council. However, he maintains that "rash schemes" of dispersal may threaten human survival, and orders the explorers to surrender themselves to the Council in three days time. Lev refuses - which is just as well, otherwise there would be no story.

The scene shifts, in the second chapter, to Victoria City itself, where Luz Marino Falco Cooper is picking her way through a volume or arcane lore entitled "First Aid: A Manual of Emergency Care for Injuries" and puzzling over a red stamp on the title page which bears the legend: "Donated by the World Red Cross for the use of the Penal Colony on Victoria". And there you have it - Victoria is a futuristic Botany Bay, and both the "aristocrats" of Victoria City and the "riff-raff" of Shantih are descendants of the original convicts, the former derived from people sent out by the government of Brasil-America and the latter from people sent out, later, by the government of Canamerica. Although the two groups have not merged, the city and the town are deeply interdependent. Population pressure, agricultural shortages and sheer bloody-mindedness are combining to bring the tense situation between them to a head - and one can almost plot the rest for oneself.

The Eye of the Heron is not only a space opera, it is a half-hearted space opera, which is almost a contradiction in terms. It reads like a cross between Francis Parkman's The Oregon Trail and Jack Vance's The Blue World (the latter a far superior "civilisation of convicts" novel), and the narrative excitement that pervaded LeGuin's earlier space operas, Rocannon's World and Planet of Exile, is here altogether missing.

The messages are somewhat forced, to say the least. Here is a typical example from page 75:

"If people forget what happened in the past, they have to do it all over again, they never get into the future. That's why they kept fighting wars, on Earth. They forgot what the last one was like. We are starting fresh. Because we remember the old mistakes, and won't make them."

The characters are no better and no worse than they could be, given the limited length and the circumscribed nature of the story. Stereotypes all, they never exist as individuals in their own right. Lev and Luz might as well be called Hansel and Gretel: "bland" isn't too strong a word with which to describe them. Not, I suppose, that characterisation really matters in a space opera..

The "scientific" content of this novella does not bear discussion. The planet Victoria is nothing more than a piece of back-projected stock footage from a film like Drums Along the Mohawk. The "soft" sciences are likewise skimmed: the infrastructures of both Victorian societies are too simplistic for words. Not, I suppose, that science matters in space opera either....

It may well be that one expects too much from Ursula LeGuin; even Jove (or Minerva) nods every once in a while. The Left Hand of Darkness, The Dispossessed and the "Earthsea" books are all very hard acts to follow, and perhaps

NICK LOWE

(MYTHS OF THE NEAR FUTURE by J.G. BALLARD. Jonathan Cape 1982, 205pp., £6.95)

Nevertheless, a number of Ballard admirers have been getting understandably worried of late. In less than a year, Ballard has published three novellas ("News from the Sun", Ambit 87/Interzone one-shot; "Memories of the Space Age", Interzone 2; "Myths of the Near Future", F&SF October 1982) about the terminal stages of chronaesthetic pandemics triggered by unforeseen metaphysical side-effects of the space programme. Man's violation of extraplanetary space sets off a progressive disintegration of the human time-sense, and we join our hero to await the final liberation from time (and his discovery that it is a liberation) amid the familiar landscape of deserted hotels, empty swimming-pools, abandoned space sites, casinos, beaches and deserts, while his wife disappears into an ambiguous offscene relationship with the enigmatic aviator who turns out to be the true prophet of the coming post-temporal age. These three pieces, so obsessively similar that they melt together in the memory even after several readings, and so saturated with recurrent Ballard motifs that they can hardly be read without an ironic savour of parody, make up almost his entire output of new fiction for 1982 (and, incidentally, there is only one other story in this collection later than 1978).

What is happening here? Is Ballard trapped in a fugue of his own that forces him to write endless ever-more-identical recapitulations of "The Voices of Time" from 1960? Is he driven, like so many of his beloved Surrealists, to recycle a limited stock of private symbols in unlimited successive recombinations? I'm in no position to account for the genesis of this set of novellas, but I have too much faith in Ballard to suppose for a moment that he's lost control, that his obsessions have taken him over. It may be that he's been purposely experimenting, in his painterly way, with a series of versions of a personal work too rich to be definitive in any one form. It would be interesting to know the order of composition of these three pieces - "Memories of the Space Age", not included in the collection, is presumably the last, yet it seems considerably the weakest of the group. At any rate, while it should be said in mitigation that all three are extremely beautiful stories, and succeed beyond all expectation in seducing the reader out of his initial sense of Oh-no-not-this-one-again, it's hard to feel there's any residual need for a definitive treatment of the theme. One presumes Ballard still hasn't seen The Falls.

The real strengths of Ballard's recent writing are better exhibited by the shorter pieces in Myths. Ballard's voice and vision have been so distinctive for so long now that it's easy to overlook some pretty radical respects in which they've developed over the years. Most surprising, in retrospect, is the transformation of the almost entirely humourless Ballard of the fifties and sixties (if one disregards a couple of laboured early comic pieces) into the wickedly subtle black satirist of the eighties. Ballard's sense of humour has tended to go undetected, because his irony is often so deadpan that it can be hard to sep-

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arate surreal comedy from sober nightmare; but with hindsight one can trace this phase back at least as early as High-Rise, a much funnier novel than anyone really appreciated when it came out. (I think especially of the opening joke, which puzzled me a great deal at the time.) The targets of his satire, on the whole, are easy game - television, America, Sexual politics - and the satirical premises ludicrously implausible, any practical difficulties usually skated over. Ballard isn't bothered by this. Rather than squander imaginative momentum on convincing extrapolation, the traditional mode of near-future satire, he takes delight in the grand grotesque. To date, his most sustained and successful effort in this vein, and his most attractive novel for fifteen years despite the occasional lapse into deserted motels and mysterious aviators, is the marvellously gothic Hello America. But several of the best Myths, all earlier than the novel, have the same flavour.

Thus "Having A Wonderful Time" has Europe's middle-class drones surreptitiously interned in Mediterranean resorts by permanent flight delays; "The Smile" wryly ridicules male sexual attitudes in a parable of a man who finds the perfect match in a taxidermic mannequin; while "The Intensive Care Unit" wittily shows us a rather unlikely society whose members spend their entire lives individually segregated and interact only by television, reducing all social behaviour to the manipulation of media-made self-images. I chuckled mightily over "Theatre of War", a spoof World in Action documentary on a divided Britain that has become America's new Vietnam, enjoying it not for the facile moral that the Vietnam experience is a symptom of the incurable American disease and didn't need South-East Asia to happen in, but for the elegant pastiche of military interview dialogue. The pleasure was soured by the concluding author's note revealing that much of the dialogue is authentic Vietnam material transplanted; but that souring, of course, is just what Ballard wants.

The remainder of the ten stories in Myths are a various lot. "A Host of Furious Fancies" and "Motel Architecture" are slight, clever, ironic pieces: the former a psychiatric mystery yarn with a not terribly successful twist ending, the latter another satire on television rather too closely recalling "The Overloaded Man" in its plot and the slightly earlier "Intensive Care Unit", with which it's here unhappily juxtaposed, in its premise. The much-reprinted "Zodiac 2000" is an ingenious but somewhat precious fiction in twelve titled paragraphs; I liked it the first time round, but the formal device has begun to seem rather tired by now and not really justified by the content.

The most powerful story in the book is undoubtedly "The Dead Time", a remarkable fusion of autobiographical experience with surreal fantasy recounting a young man's increasingly bizarre relationship with a lorryload of corpses hijacked from a Shanghai internment camp on the last day of WWII. As in Hello America, moments of high farce add to the sense of dreamlike dislocation. The essence of this exquisite story resists description; to commend the masterly use of landscape and psychological colour is like admiring a Max Ernst canvas for the brushwork.

I like the new Ballard very much, and I can't believe he's in serious danger of getting bogged down in his old obsessions. A post-Myths story, the Bayleyesque "Report on an Unidentified Space Station" (City Limits, 10/12/82) is one of his best in years, and has no motels, swimming-pools, sinister airmen, or any of the rest. Myths of the Near Future is an excellent mop-up collection, but when all but three of the stories date to before The Unlimited Dream Company offers little hint of where Ballard's heading at the moment. The space-sickness stories might look like evidence to the contrary, but I suspect his predictable phase is behind him.

GOLLANCZ

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