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The Critical Journal Of The BSFA

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EDITORIAL

The following is a short article by C. Pembleton which was written in response to Paul Kincaid's Vector 115 editorial. He raises questions which I'm sure many of you have asked yourself over the years but have never followed up. By publishing this edited version in the editorial, and by discussing it therein, I hope that the response will be sufficient to reach some sort of consensus, on what should or should not be done. Without more ado then:

THE AWAKENING OF A CONSCIENCE : THE DAY THE BUCK STOPPED HERE

BY C.PEMBLETON

This article is an attempt to answer some of the issues raised by Paul Kincaid in his valedictory editorial in Vector 115. I shall keep to the first person, because the opinions I express are my own. As far as I know no one else shares my feelings about SF, no one else considers the BSFA to offer less than it might, no one else is writing a science fiction novel with hopes that the BSFA will help in a practical way.

Paul is right, we DO deserve the SF we get - but if the BSFA does not help in a practical way, then what chance does any writer not considered 'safe' have of getting published. I know that our journals publish short fiction; but I write novels. A good novelist is not necessarily a good short story writer. The BSFA has nothing to offer me as a writer.

The BSFA journals help me immensely as a reader, however. They also help me with 'behind-the-scenes' information on publishing houses. I am also well-satisfied with the criticism. What I am not satisfied with is the lack of commitment to publish fiction of unknown authors. If the BSFA published its own fiction, then unknown writers, such as myself, might have a chance later with the big-name publishers. If getting a first-novel published is so difficult then why, oh why, not help us?

Paul, you ask me why I allow the sorry state of SF to continue. I tell you: I do not allow it! Every night I abandon my wife to continue writing my novel. I have written 111 pages so far - but, when it is finished, will I find a publisher who is prepared to gamble on an 'unknown'? Is the BSFA prepared to do that? Do enough of my fellow members want that?

Irrespective of whether the novel will be published, I will continue writing because I enjoy it. The biggest driving-force, however, is that I want to contribute something to the world. It is up to me to do my best, because I am worth the best my efforts can attain. To put it another way, the science fiction I write, is the science fiction the world will remember me by. In that sense, it is the science fiction I deserve.

C.Pembleton

One of the echoing cries you hear from the BSFA hierarchy (don't forget that includes myself) whenever somebody suggests something new is COST! COST! and I suppose that is rightly so because afterall, the money we have is finite, and a quick glance at the accounts will show that we just about break-even. But in this case, for the time being at least, let us ignore the cost complications and look at whether there is a need for a change.

Up to now the BSFA has tried to encourage the promotion of science fiction through its various publications and enterprises. It has published leaflets and journals on all manner of things to do with SF, but with the exception of short fiction in Focus, (not forgetting Orbiter) we studiously avoid putting our money into the stuff called fiction. Why is this? Partly due to the cost, but mainly because we appear to like to distance ourselves from the mucky business side of writing. It is so much easier to criticize from afar, ignoring economic realities as something not relevant to us. However, to a large extent this is the right attitude - we are here to judge the quality of fiction, not the commercial viability of it! But consider this. Publishers publish fiction to make a profit and the type of fiction that makes a profit must have a mass-market appeal. Therefore, there is going to be a natural inbuilt reluctance of the publishers to try anything that is slightly out of the ordinary. For instance, the New Wave of the sixties was not put on the road by a major publisher, but by one individual pushing a point of view. Oh yes, the publishing houses did follow suit later on, but only once the commercial viability had been proven. I cannot see that this situation has changed. Let us take the output, for the last year, of the largest (and virtually only) hardback SF publisher - Gollancz. In their spring catalogue we had Le Guin, Watson, Levis, Coney, Silverberg, and Asimov; in the Autumn we have Herbert & Ransom, Sladek, Pohl, Benford, Levis, Gentle, Shaw, and Carr. A total of 14 books of which 3 are by British authors and 1 is by a new British SF author. The reason why I'm giving so much room to Mary Gentle's book now becomes self-evident, her novel is their sum contribution to new SF writers this year. (As an aside, looking at the above proportion of American SF writers (78%) is it that much of a surprise that the BMC Promotion is heavily US influenced?) However, Gollancz is the best SF publisher we have and this pattern is not just reflected in other publishers, but in a lot of cases the domination of established writers, and at that American writers, is even greater. If there was ever a moment for an independent science fiction publisher, now is that time.

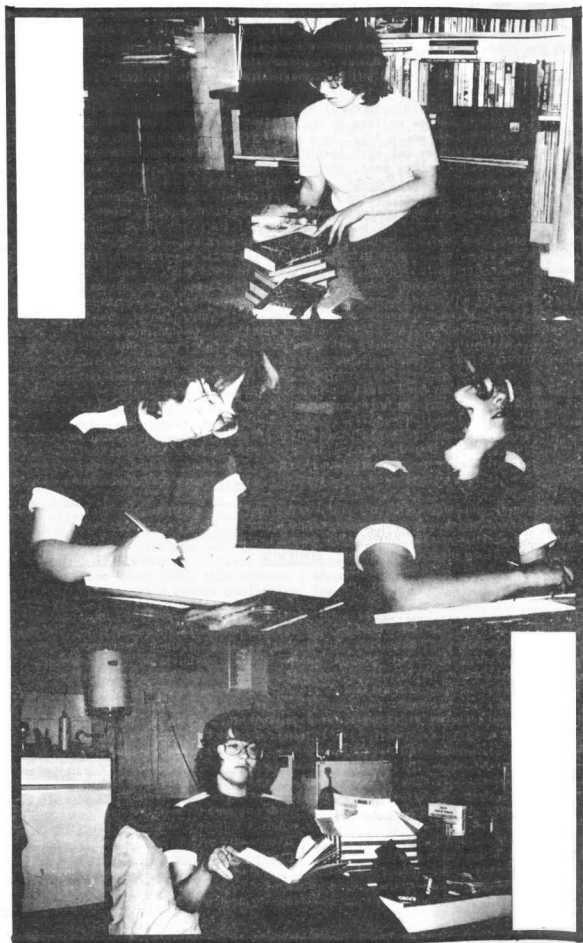
Having established the need for an independent SF publisher, the next factor, has to be the practicalities, the cost and work involved. The concept of an independent SF publisher, is of course, not new and in fact there are a couple already in existence. One of the newest is Greystoke Mobray Ltd, who published Pictures at an Exhibition edited by Ian Watson. To get a very quick guide to the problems and cost involved I phoned one of their major people, Lionel Fanthorpe. First of all they had to form a limited company which cost them about £500, this expense I should think we can forgo, if the charter for the BSFA covers publishing. The first novel they published (The Black Lion by Patricia & Lionel Fanthorpe, 1979) for colour covers, all printing, 159pp, and 20,000 copies cost £5,000. Since then after very extensive promoting for such a small company they have sold about 6500 copies at 45p (cover price 95p) a time. It does not take much of a mathematician to see that to recover their printing costs alone, they will have to sell over 10,000 copies. Not that we would start with 20,000 copies anyway! The optimum number of books that you would want printed is 3,000, however, due to the economies of production (the more you print the greater the reduction in Unit Price) you would have to go for a print run of 5,000 copies. Due to the recession in the printing industry you would be able to get them for the budget price of around £2,500. On top of this amount, you would need advertising (£200), distribution, (£200) and of course a fee for the writer, be that a lump sum or royalties. Ignoring all other costs, and paying our figurative writer £100, to put the paperback into the shops would cost £3,000. Say it has a cover price of £1.50, the wholesale price, on sale or return, would be £0.75. If we sold all 5,000 copies we would make a profit of £750... The problem is, I somehow doubt that we would sell all 5,000 copies. We could strike lucky and sell to one of the big chains, Menzies or Smiths, but how many would they take? With Pictures after a lot of work, Smiths accepted 1,000, country wide, useful 1

agree, but it is not really enough. It is a decidedly risky business, but it is possible if the initial money could be found, and there is the nub. Every member of the BSFA would have to pay a minimum of £3.50 to get the show on the road. Are you all still interested?

There is, however, a different (I think better) road to follow. Let us look at our aims. Although we all deplore the current state of science fiction publishing, we feel that there is new British talent waiting to be discovered but because of the reluctance of British publishers with their penchant for reliable products, new writers do not stand much chance of getting into print. What the publishers would like, is a guarantee that a book will sell, something of course they get with American SF, as those books are already tested. So, if that is what they want, why do we not give it to them. Colin Greenland in his review of Witchbreed states "nothing makes a bestseller, like an endorsement from another bestseller", and it is upon this principle that I suggest that the BSFA considers setting up an ad hoc, informal committee made up primarily of authors but also with other people interested in the publishing world of science fiction (agents and publishers for instance). The function of this ad hoc committee would be to read manuscripts which have been passed and selected by the BSFA (it would be impossible for the committee to look at every novel sent in, some sort of selection would have to be made, otherwise the committee would soon chuck the task in!) and to write a short letter/article/review on the book. All these would then be gathered together with the manuscript and sent, or better still taken, to the publisher with the hope that these affidavits would convince him/her that here was a novel worthy of publication. This could not be done too often, otherwise it would lose its effect. Also, I feel that we would have to restrict applications to books that have already gone round the publishing circuit and only come to the BSFA as a last resort. However, this is not the time for discussing details, what I'm after now are your views on which turning we should take. To the left, you have a possibility of an independent publisher, to the right a publishing pressure group, or, of course, we can take the straight and narrow, and continue blindly on...

Geoff Rippington

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MARY GENTLE

Interviewed By

DAVID V. BARRETT

Mary Gentle's name is well known to Vector readers for her contribution of reviews, articles and letters over some years. A former Civil Servant, Mary is now studying for a BA at College in Bournemouth, where she lives. Golden Witchbreed, her first adult novel, was published by Gollancz on September 1st.

BARRETT: I believe you wrote your first novel when you were a teenager. Could you say something about that one?

MARY GENTLE: A Hawk in Silver was my first novel, published when I was 21, written between the ages of 18 and 19. This was what Gollancz (who brought it out) call a 'young adult' fantasy. It's based around Hastings, where I used to live, and is autobiographical in bits - although once something has been through the fictive process, it ceases to be autobiographical. In a way, it's a mythologising of experience: it has Celtic myth in it, and comprehensive schooling, and other things that were part of being teenage in the late 60s and early 70s. So much of it is personal to me that it's probably impossible for me to judge it as good or bad.

BARRETT: Your heroine, Holly Anderson, has a rough time at her school: "Christ how I hate this place, hate hate hate it," and "Two weeks and we're back in that buggering school with bitch-Gabriel, and she's going to try and beat hell out of me." Was A Hawk in Silver an attempt to purge your school-life from your system - a catharsis?

MARY GENTLE: I don't know about 'purge' my school life, 'preserve' is possibly closer to the mark. Even I couldn't believe how bad a time I was having; when I left school - faster than a speeding bullet, as you might say - I recall thinking that nothing, no job, could ever be as bad as having to get up and go to that school.. the strange thing about that is that it took over two years for the feeling to wear off.

But as regards A Hawk in Silver: when you commit something to writing, even if you could do it exactly as you experienced whatever it was, then the experience changes its meaning. It's in the context of a different story. So even if there were strictly autobiographical episodes in Hawk, they don't really differ from what was made up out of whole cloth. (And having undergone that fictive process, it becomes very difficult to sort out what did happen and what didn't; writers use up their own pasts, I think).

BARRETT: That reminds me of something Old Venn said in Delany's Tales of Neveryon, about changing the meaning and the impact of real events by making them into a story.

MARY GENTLE: Delany often puts

things about the process of writing into clear focus for me. (Which is not all he does, of course; I think if I had to choose one and only one writer as a favourite, it would be Delany.) The point about the fictive process, as old Venn's tale implies, is that there are no 'real' experiences. There is an experience, perceived as conceptual or verbal: the mind then edits this, at the moment of impact and much later, into different forms; depending on past experiences, culture, future expectations, anything you care to mention. Personal and general histories are fictions we make up as we go along; when someone else does it, and the reader is conscious of it, it's recognisable as fiction.

BARRETT: A Hawk in Silver reminded me strongly of Alan Garner's early work, in that it was a mixture of 'real' life - school, fights, holidays, family - and the world of faerie. But it's a lot stronger than, say, The Moon of Gomerath. What was the reaction to it when it was published?

MARY GENTLE: Garner was one of the trinity of writers I absorbed in childhood (the other two being Lewis and Tolkien) so I'm not in the least surprised that I borrowed the form. (I tend to regard HAWK as an analogue for a child who was an outsider, with access to worlds not popular: literary and imaginative. But that isn't what I meant when I wrote it, and it may not be what I regard it as in ten years time. After a while, reading one's own fiction, it begins to tell a story quite independent of what the general reader will see.) The resemblance to Garner was noted when the book came out, the general consensus being that it was an inferior imitation, though one or two people were complimentary about it. The 'real' life bits came in for adverse comment from those who don't care to believe that such behaviour occurs. Or that it isn't the province of literature, if it does. This is irritating, but there'll always be people who think that way, I

suppose.

BARRETT: Golden Witchbreed can be compared with some of Ursula LeGuin's books. Would you say that she was an influence on your writing?

MARY GENTLE: Yes. And also the influence on Ursula LeGuin influenced me (if that isn't getting a shade too incestuous); I'm thinking of Austin Tappen Wright's Islandia. These things tend to lie around in the subconscious, and it's hell's own job getting rid of them.

BARRETT: That sounds as if you'd rather not be 'influenced' at all! Who else do you read for pleasure?

MARY GENTLE: 'Influence' comes in 24 hours a day, from all quarters of the globe; what I wish I could stop doing is borrowing fictive structures to work my own variations on. I don't always do it, but sometimes....

Reading 'for pleasure'? Now what else would one read for, I wonder? But of course, pleasures come in strange and varying descriptions..

Who do I read? Well, OK: Conrad, Trollope, CP Snow, Georgette Heyer, John Barth, Michael Bishop, Borges, Richard Adams, Stanley Weyman, Peter Beagle, Dostoevsky, James Branch Cabell, Lord Dunsany, ER Eddison, John Crowley, John Cowper Powys, S Delany, Leslie Charteris, Rider Haggard, MR James, Hans Helmut Kirst, William Goldman, Alasdair Grey, M John Harrison, Harlan Ellison, RA Lafferty, Robert Graves, Sheridan and Shaffer and Shakespeare, WB Yeats and James Elroy Flecker, Gene Wolfe, Stephen Donaldson, Thomas Middleton, Zoe Oldenbourg, Dorothy Parker, Stevie Smith, HP Lovecraft, Leiber and Lindsay, Machiavelli and Marx, Joanna Russ, Mervyn Peake, Keith Roberts, Christopher Priest, Thomas Love Peacock, Cordwainer Smith, John Webster, Mary Shelley, Charles Williams... and that's only this week! No, I lie. That's what I come across rummaging through my shelves,

and since I've a habit of reading whatever stands still long enough, I've no doubt missed out many. It would probably be shorter if you asked me who I'd read that I wished I hadn't... shorter, but not very tactful to them!

BARRETT: Golden Witchbreed is a very long and detailed book. How long did it take to write?

MARY GENTLE: Difficult one. I'd been fiddling about with the details of Orthe for some years, on and off, among other projects. Then I think it took me slightly over two years to write Witchbreed, but that again was on and off. (A lot of writing is done without pen to paper, if you follow me.)

BARRETT: One of the elukoi, the faerie-people in A Hawk in Silver, had 'hair that appeared to grow down the back of his neck... his eyes were a startling gold, and slit-pupilled like a cat's' (p38). No nictitating membranes, but do the origins of Witchbreed extend that far back?

MARY GENTLE: The origins extend that far back, and further; I used to have something I wrote around 14/15 with the fenborn in it.. On the other hand, I have other projects (not published, and just as well, since I'm not as yet competent enough to cope with them) whose roots go equally far back. I think it was JM Barrie who said nothing really important happens to one after the age of twelve. I wouldn't go that far, but I think traits and directions and obsessions are laid down in the first ten or fifteen years, and elaborated on and worked out in later life.

BARRETT: How do you fit in your writing schedule with your normal daily life?

MARY GENTLE: 'Normal daily life' - I don't think I've got one! When I've been in full-time work I've pottered around writing at

weekends and evenings - or, in the case of the Civil Service, during office hours. When I was free-lancing, I wrote whenever I wasn't doing anything else. These last two years at college, I've written mostly out of term-time. Now I write mostly mornings, in this summer vacation; and I think I'll have to do college part-time next year, or I'll get nothing done at all.

BARRETT: What sort of free-lance work were you doing? And what are your plans when you finish your course?

MARY GENTLE: Free-lance writing of novels, short stories, and (if memory serves) a radio play; nothing sold. Cleaning jobs paid the rent; there're a lot of them locally. The college course is a BA Combined Studies. I started off with English, Politics and Geography; now I'm down to English and Politics. I'm planning to do the last year part-time, and write, so I don't quite know what I plan to do when I finish the course. I must be good for something. My ideal life would be to work at something wildly interesting between bouts of writing. This makes me an employer's nightmare....

BARRETT: Writing a book like Golden Witchbreed, you obviously have to immerse yourself in the culture you're creating. Have you found any difficulty in leaving Orthe behind to start work on something else? Or are you taking a breather before you start again?

MARY GENTLE: It became apparent to me that there would be two books about Orthe, and I'm currently writing the other one. There was a gap between, when I was getting what is laughingly called an education; and I could cheerfully leave Orthe to its own devices during that period - I was writing short stories on other themes. Sometimes it's nice to have a story you can see the end of in weeks, as opposed to years. After this book, I plan to do....er... something

completely different, to borrow a phrase. There's a lot about Orthe's culture that I feel I exhausted in Witchbreed; fortunately there are (as a glance at the map will show) large areas I didn't cover in great detail: so one can extend the borders a bit. This book is different in tone as well, I'm finding. It will be about the same length, I think; I'm just dragging the first draft to a conclusion. The purpose of a first draft is to get it wrong, so that you then know what to do right.... I hope.

BARRETT: Is the similarity of sound between 'Earth' and 'Orthe' deliberate?

MARY GENTLE: Yes. A number of years ago I was, in a very amateur way, fiddling around with the roots of words; in consequence a lot of the terms in Witchbreed make language experts wince in horror, and I don't think that I blame them. It did occur to me (after I'd written the book) that 'Orthe' is an anagram of 'other', which is interesting from the psychological point of view. LeGuin in The Language of Night has a lot to say about Jungian archetypes (didn't read that till afterwards either - maybe there's something to this 'collective unconscious' idea!).

BARRETT: I'm particularly intrigued by the language in Witchbreed - or rather, the languages, as you don't make the usual SF assumption that on other worlds everyone speaks the same tongue. The Orthean words have a ring of truth: S'an and I'an Telestre, S'aranth, ashiren and ashiren-te, l'ri-an, n'ri-n'suth and so on. Frank Herbert based most of his Arrakis language on genuine Arab, Bedouin, desert-dweller usage; do I detect some Celtic influence in your language?

MARY GENTLE: The phrase 'ring of truth' puts a finger on it: I have to 'hear' a word in Orthean, and it has to sound right; then I spell it (probably wrongly)

and the reader is on his/her own... Since I did read a lot of Celtic mythology (a lot of most mythology, come to think of it) there probably is an influence.

BARRETT: The Witchbreed are distrustful largely because of the impact of their technology on society and, as I read it, on the sanctity of life and the individual. Does this reflect a real concern on your part?

MARY GENTLE: Yes; I'm not anti-technology, but anti the misuse of it. On the other hand, anything from a bone hide-scraper upwards is technology. And a flint tool can be used to dig furrows, or brain somebody. So all 'technological' problems are human problems. This makes them more difficult to overcome... I don't seriously think, for example, that we could interdict technology in the way that the Well-houses do with Witchbreed artifacts, but then there are differences in human and Orthean psychology (one speculates, naturally, about alternative 'human natures'). Witchbreed isn't an allegory, but there are applicable speculations - else why write SF?

BARRETT: But can 'cross-cultural pollution' be a real problem? The envoy's caution about introducing technology to a pre-tech society was not shared by, for example, Victorian missionaries...

MARY GENTLE: There's a complex argument here that's difficult to put into a few sentences without sounding pompous. Things like respect for different cultures, other species and other ideologies can only flourish at the moment on the edges or in a decline of - to use a cliché - capitalist society. There's a commercial imperative operating with the Victorian mentality; when you add that to something as single-minded as religion, it's not surprising they made such an effort to re-create the world in their own imagine.

Regarding Orthe, I feel that's

one of the problems that Witchbreed didn't answer; but then, it wasn't intended to. (In any further consideration of Orthe, it has to be a major theme.)

BARRETT: Do you have any interaction with other authors? If so, do you find this helps you in your own writing, or does it sometimes get in the way?

MARY GENTLE: Pass. Could you define 'interaction' a bit more precisely - in the flesh, in correspondence, through their works?

BARRETT: I was thinking mainly of writers' Workshops, Postal Circles, that sort of thing. Do you think they have any real value? (The writer of the last Arrow/Radio 4 Bookself Award practically admitted - afterwards! - that almost every page of 'his' book had been discussed by his local writers' Workshop.)

MARY GENTLE: Don't start me off about Writers' Circles! I would be impolite, you would be sued, and... A circle that shall remain nameless had a secretary and a chairperson who shall also remain nameless, who tried harder than you would credit to extend it into areas other than True Confessions/Mills & Boon romances... but that has little to do with writing in any shape or form... enough! As for workshops, ask me after I've come back from Milford in September, then I'll have had experience of one. (That Arrow competition winner didn't suffer, certainly, from intensive discussion.) Offhand, I think writing is irrevocably a solitary vice - er, profession - but perhaps that's just the way that I personally work.

BARRETT: The reader learns about Orthe at the same time as Christie, the envoy, is learning; because she's telling the tale, things which are unfamiliar to us, especially in the first few chapters, are unfamiliar to her as

well. This increases the reader-identification with her; character and reader discover together. Was this the same for author and character?

MARY GENTLE: I had, after several false starts, to write in the first person; so that I was discovering Orthe at the same time as Christie; it was the only way I could be convincing. And there was also a process whereby I discovered Christie's character and how she would react to things as I went along.

BARRETT: How much, then, is Christie you?

MARY GENTLE: Hardly at all. I suppose this is an inevitable question, since the first person is used; but the same applies to 'character' in the fictive process as applies to 'experience.' Or, to turn it round, Christie is me in the same way that all the other characters are me: that is, part invention, part other people, part unrealised capabilities. Identity isn't the simplest thing to discuss!

BARRETT: You mentioned mythology earlier, in connection with A Hawk in Silver. Are there any Earth-mythological references in Witchbreed, or are the various peoples and their history, religion and customs all solely your creation?

MARY GENTLE: There are adaptations, but I can't remember exactly what they are; the mythological tends to enter fiction in an organic rather than a planned way, I suppose because mythology reflects psychology.

BARRETT: I found Witchbreed a very musical book. In my role as Roy Plumley, is music important to you? Do you use music while you write?

MARY GENTLE: There's generally music going on where I am, though not always while I

work; and I tend to latch on to bits and pieces of everything. Sometimes I'll use it for an emotional 'fix' on a particular scene. Music is something that's important to me, but I don't really think about it that much - if that makes any kind of sense.

BARRETT: Do you regard writing as 'work,' or as the most essential part of your life, or both, or what?

MARY GENTLE: What?

I think that means I could answer yes, and no, to each question, depending on how I happened to feel on the day that you asked... and how well the writing was going.

BARRETT: I don't know what Gollancz's blurb writer is putting on the jacket, but at some stage comparisons are bound to be made, the usual 'Nor since Lor of the Drings..' stuff that appears on almost every new SF or Fantasy book-cover. If you had any choice, which books would you like - or NOT like - to be mentioned in the same breath as Golden Witchbreed? I'm thinking of The Left Hand of Darkness or Dune, but other people might see a comparison with such things as Donaldson's umpteen trilogies, or Julian May's plasticine (sic!) world.

MARY GENTLE: If I had the choice, NONE! (Retires in gibbering hysteria.) Wouldn't object to Dune; I still think the first one is a good book. Kindly omit Tolkien; 'Tolkien' is rapidly degenerating into a label for all kinds of SF and fantasy. Donaldson is very underrated (I refer to the first trilogy); I think some of what he does, in using fantasy for a landscape of the human psyche, is very powerful. Though I don't know whether it would be apt to compare Witchbreed to him, or not. I remember the Plasticine, doesn't it come before the Upper and Lower Cretinous...?)

BARRETT: I'd imagine that very few Vector readers regularly buy SF hardbacks. Will we have long to wait before Golden Witchbreed appears in paperback?

MARY GENTLE: It wouldn't really be in my interests to tell you that Arrow will be bringing out the paperback in September/October '84, because then people won't buy the lovely expensive hardbacks - so I won't tell you...

BARRETT: You could have done a lot worse than have two novels out of two published by Gollancz. You mentioned earlier that you have - and have had - 'other projects'. What's your success rate with these? - or do you have the usual collection of rejection slips?

MARY GENTLE: Success rate zero: and I have a fine collection of rejection slips, some deserved, and some not. Though my reasons for saying so are probably not the same as an editor's. From my point of view, I not only see how far the finished work falls short of the original conception, but how far that conception falls short of the optimum. (There's no such thing as the optimum novel, of course; common sense tells me that. Writing has very little to do with common sense.)

BARRETT: Why do you write?

MARY GENTLE: I wish I knew...This is a good question, and I wish I had a good answer for it. On the other hand, if one discovers the cause of obsessive behaviour, then it probably ceases to be obsessive - and I'm happy as I am, thanks.

BARRETT: Mary Gentle, thank you very much.

THE QUEEN OF COUNTERS, REVERSED

Colin Greenland

Circumstances were not auspicious. I'd just completed rewriting my own first novel, Daybreak on a Different Mountain, which was psychically exhausting. I was ill, I needed to rest. Instead I had a lot of work to do: a manuscript to read (407pp.), a proof of Helliconia Summer (398pp.) and now this (476pp.). It didn't help matters that there were three copies on my review shelf - the 'Interzone' copy, the Vector copy, and the 'British Book News' copy. I knew I didn't have to read three copies, but subconsciously it worried me. It began to look like a trilogy ($3 \times 476 = 1,428\text{pp.}$). I didn't like the title, I thought it sounded goopy and magical. "Anne McCaffrey loved it," said the Arrow Promotions Director, and read me her letter over the phone. "Oh, good," I said. Or was it "Oh, God"?

Some white magic of my own was clearly needed to charm away the thunder-cloud gathering over the three copies in the corner. I took two paracetamol. I decided positive thinking was called for. I had to psych myself up for this one.

Well then. It's a pleasure, I thought, to welcome a new - newish - writer into print. It's a pleasure to welcome a newish British writer, a newish British female writer, into print. I'm very interested to see what Mary Gentle can do, not having read A Hawk in Silver but only a handful of stories that are almost good, and a larger handful of reviews that are admirable. I'm glad that three major publishers on two continents reckon her novel is going to be very popular. Hell, I'm even glad the Dragon Goddess thinks it's the best thing since beans on toast, because these days nothing makes a bestseller like an endorsement from another bestseller. Congratulations, Mary. Yay, Mary! Rah, rah, rah, Mary!

Thus, holding my precariously-contrived appetite very delicately, I broached the book.

Golden Witchbreed isn't about witches at all. I haven't seen the Gollancz publicity, but the people at Arrow are calling it a fantasy, presumably pushing firmly for that McCaffrey market. It's not a fantasy, it's science fiction, set on the fifth planet of Carrick's Star, known to its inhabitants as Orthe. Golden Witchbreed is the story of Lynne de Lisle Christie, envoy from Earth, who struggles to put the case for the Dominion to the suspicious Southland Ortheans, and to understand in turn their point of view. For a hundred pages I struggled along with her. Christie had the advantage of hypno-tapes on the journey out. I didn't. I had to learn the culture and the landscape step by step, through the language. "'You,' Sadri said, with her hand on Ruric's shoulder, 'you're his arykei. When are you going to become n'ri n'suth Hanratha?'"

When indeed? Just as soon as I can spot the difference between Sadri Geren Hanathra and Evalen Kerys-Andrethe, and tell a rashaku from a rukshi. At

least I know that the skurrai is cousin to the marhaz, though there's no skurrai-jasin outside Tathcaer, and that a lot of the northern telestres are chirith-goyen harvesters; and I make sure to hold my harur-nilqiri in my right hand and my harur-nazari in my left - or is it the other way round? Not to worry. Mary Gentle doesn't rush us. For all their intrigues and conspiracies, their intricate patterns of jealousy and affiliation, Ortheans like to take their time about things, time to mull it over before coming to a decision. Come back in a generation or two. No, Christie won't get anywhere until she's mastered the names of every wayside flower, every cloth and moth, every way to braid your mane without getting your claws caught, every nuance of a nictitating membrane. And nor will we.

I thought of The Lord of the Rings, and of Dune, and of Helliconia Spring. I thought, if you like this sort of thing, then this is the sort of thing you will like. I pressed on.

There's a game they play in the Southland with counters and a hexagonal board divided into a triangular grid, a game called ochmir. It's a bit like Go, and a bit like Kensington. You put out your counters in turn, and when you gain a majority in a little hexagon, it falls to you. The counters are all blue on one side and white on the other, so that when you win a hexagon you can turn your opponent's pieces over and make them your own. Which, of course, might alter the composition of the overlapping hexagons all the way round, and all the way round again, the change spreading out across the board in inevitable ripples of logic. What's more, the obverse and reverse can have different values, and different powers of movement, so your feeble ferroirn might suddenly turn into your opponent's mighty leremoc. And vice versa. All over the board. When a game of ochmir goes, it goes. Just when you thought you were securely set in a stable mosaic of tiny pieces tightly interlocked, everything starts shifting and clicking and sliding; hidden dangers rise up and safe areas give way on all sides. It's a game of strategic reversal in an inscrutably complex system. You can't trust anything. The more you look, the less you know. And it's nearly half past two in the morning, you're on page 391, and you realise you simply can't go to sleep until you've finished Golden Witchbreed.

Golden Witchbreed is one long novel. It feels like several long novels - that is, several times it reaches climaxes and crises that would be quite adequate for whole novels on their own: especially first novels. But the reversals have their own logic, and it has to be followed. If this one here falls, then that one will fall too, and after that that one over there you haven't looked at recently is going to be trouble. It's a novel of endurance. Christie's stamina is phenomenal. So is Mary Gentle's. She remembers where she's put every counter, what its face value is, where it can and can't move, and what's on the underneath, all through crowded towns and desolate camps, across tracts of horrible country, through snow and marsh, up mountains and down again. Christie is on the run, framed with somebody else's murder, pursued by unscrupulous enemies, accompanied not only by a child but also by an unfriendly mercenary who has tried to kill her before and may still be trying. Her only supporters are aliens, with no particular reason to protect her; they're miles away on this world without motor transport or telecommunications, and in any case, they've been told she's dead. All that environmental detail, the flora and fauna, the kinships and ancient enmities, all the names and subtle significances become real, with reality's full weight: not only because Christie's now got to survive in that landscape, but also because they are all abruptly, profoundly meaningless. Gentle never allows Christie - or us - to forget that Orthe is a self-sufficient alien world that doesn't need her a bit. It's got nothing to do with her. It doesn't matter how attentively she studies it, how thoroughly she immerses herself in it, how conscientiously she puts aside her official duty and obeys it. The other Terrans on the xeno-team blame her for going native, but native is the one thing she can never be. Her hair is wrong, her eyes are wrong, her fingers are wrong, her

finger nails are wrong. She's the woman who fell to Orthe, where onomasty recapitulates genealogy, where their territory and their ancestry, their roots and their branches, are more important than any individual life, because -

But that would spoil it for you.

Sometimes Gentle follows the game a bit too far. It's not that the plot twists and sudden revelations are unreasonable, only that if they were the case, it would have been obvious long before. As Roz Kaveney points out (and someone at Arrow or Gollancz should have pointed out to Gentle), any artificial structure that big would have shown up on the first satellite photographs, so nobody could ever have thought for a moment that Carrick V was a pre-tech world. And surely, if you're among an alien people whose biology you've trained to interpret, living among them in their telestres, these communal warrens where everybody wanders in and out all the time, without knocking, surely, surely, it's not going to take you five minutes to realise why they have a special pronoun for their children? Gentle delivers her surprises without any kind of preparation, not even the teasers and indirections Gene Wolfe uses. It's almost as if she's only that minute thought of them herself - but it's not so, it's just that the mechanics of the game she's playing lag behind the fluidity of human perception. It happens at every level. The preliminary discussions after the murder have time to break for tea and reconvene before Christie gets around to saying, or anyone gets around to asking, whether the weapon was her own or not. (But then, Ortheans are far less property-conscious than humans - and round we go again.) Sometimes it's apparent that Gentle has over-reached herself, taken on one thing too many: the Hexenmeister's exchange with Christie, for example, just doesn't assume the overwhelming importance it would have inevitably have. Sometimes you turn a leremoc over and it's only a ferro on the other side.

These objections are to functions of the book as it is, doubtful effects ensuing from the structure the author has chosen (and happened) to create. The same is true of my initial glumness, when the book looked as if it were going to plod through minute particulars to no great purpose. You have to lay out the counters before you can play ochmir, and before that you have to prepare the grid. There are two hundred and sixteen triangles on the ochmir board. There are a hundred thousand telestres in the Orthean Southland. It's an incredibly ambitious book for a "beginner", and incredibly successful in terms of its own ambition.

There are those who say that it is Mary Gentle's ambition to be Ursula Le Guin, and it is easy to see why. Throughout 476 pages the echoes of The Left Hand of Darkness never quite die away. An envoy, at court, in prison and in exile, is at the mercy of furry alien race whose sexual differentiation is not as out own, a race with a political system of paranoid sensitivity and suspicion, and a language rich in soft tongued sounds. The aliens ultimately accept the envoy; the envoy ultimately discovers a new and truer identity, heroic but unconsciously so, through these adventures and ordeals, but never penetrates the heart of the alien condition, as unapproachable socially as it is sexually. The book is infused with a casual sentimentality about love and sex, and a light, unobtrusive mysticism which receives final utterance in the last lines, in a moral about going away and coming back: Le Guin to the life. But then Le Guin isn't writing Le Guin these days, not 1969 Le Guin anyway, so why shouldn't somebody else, especially if she's going to do it so boldly, so thoroughly, and so well?

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[GOLDEN WITCHBREED by MARY GENTLE. Gollancz 1983, 476pp., £8.95]

THE NEGLECTED HEROINE

JUDITH HANNA

[GOLDEN WITCHBREED by MARY GENTLE]

An intelligently written and constructed adventure story, with lively characters, set on a most seductively fleshed-out world. I enjoyed it.

The adventure story is about Lynne de Lisle Christie, first Dominion envoy to Orthe, how she sets out from the city of Tathcaer to explore the Southland and finds herself a fugitive, hunted up the Wall of the World, and to the Desert Coast city of Kasabaarde where she meets the serially immortal Hexenmeister, and back again. As she journeys, she learns about the post-technological world of Orthe and its alien civilization. That's a skeletal plot summary, pared of the complex of personalities, interrelationships, vested interests, politickings and xenophobia, by which Gentle's characters bring the book to life.

If in SF, as it is said, idea is hero, is character heroine? The Acknowledged Classics of our field are novels of ideas -- eg, Dune, which is about Religion, with Ecology as subtheme; Lord of the Rings, about the archetypal struggle of Good and Evil; The Left Hand of Darkness, about Sex Roles and Differences. Given such a dominating theme, one can review the idea as much as the book itself. Our lesser classics tend to be stories of gimmickry -- the Eric Frank Russell/Robert Sheckley school of neat twists; cerebral puzzlers which depend on fidelity to a set of explicit, or accepted scientific, premises developed logically at a cracking pace with enough stylistic fuzz to keep the reader from guessing the trick before the end: the futuristic "howdunnit", a light and ironic variant of the "whodunnit" bloodless murder mystery. Character remains a neglected heroine, sissy stuff compared to shiny silvery spaceships that go very very fast.

Witchbreed is a novel of character -- there's no driving idea in terms of which the whole story can be unravelled. Xenophobia? The title, taken with what we're told of the feared and glamorous Golden, who used to be masters of the planet and of a powerfully advanced technology but are now extinct except for the half-breeds of Kel Harantish, made this seem initially likely. Christie, also of alien race and of a technology-dominated civilization, could be, and is, easily equated with them. But though they're spoken of now and then, and a handful of half-breeds pass through the background, and although Christie suffers from being a stranger and a foreigner, xenophobia as a theme gets buried beneath the fascinating welter of acutely observed individualities and idiosyncracies as Christie meets, gets to know, and in some cases, becomes friends with the Ortheans she encounters.

This is, of course, a novel of Alien Contact -- a familiar SF subgenre. The alien encountered is Orthe. Orthe the "Other", the "antagonist" in the Greek sense; a protean, immensely complex, sometimes contradictory character (as the best literary characters are); a character whose aspects include fierce Ruric, the I'an Commander; Suthafiori, ruler of the Hundred Thousand telestres; Haltern, soft intelligencer; Blaise the mercenary, first hired to assassinate Christie, later her friend; the Hexenmeister, who perhaps encompasses all of Orthe in his immortal memory; and the Goddess Ortheans revere, a goddess who, like Terra/Gaia, is the planet personified. The book is about acquaintance, developing to friendship, even love, between Christie S'aranth (as she is nicknamed) and Orthe. Yes, it's a romantic novel. The plot is not a romance, but the novel is.

Despite what the Mills and Boon production line has made of it, romance is not a dirty word: Jane Austen used the romantic plot as a vehicle for

satirical social comment. Gentle uses an adventure plot to set Christie off exploring Orthe. When the land itself is a main character, how should an author introduce it to us but by sending the mobile protagonist travelling through it? Setting a Quest is the stylized fantasy way of doing this - a quest to destroy a ring, or to remake a Staff of Law. A visiting envoy can find that their diplomatic duties take them on a tour, or they can be chased out and set on the run: Gentle combines both these.

Once you let in human feelings, without which characters are no more than (all in chorus now) cardboard cutouts, a spot of romance naturally follows. The romantic element, except as reduced to the pulp device "sex interest", has been unnaturally absent from among the technological whizzamigns of the SF genre. Presence of the romantic element makes SF read like fantasy.

Romantic writing is as difficult to do well as any other sort of writing. On the one hand, there's the lush, glowing-pink sentimentality of Princess Di's step-granny; on the other, there's the American way, in which characters "handle" their feelings as if they were solid, indeed heavy, objects that could be picked up, taken to bits, tuned, reconditioned, and put back together again, like newly invented mechanical toys. Writing about emotions is a mistake; Mary avoids it.

Emotions, being natural reactions to events, people, memories and one's physical condition, are not isolable from the context from which they arise. Nor, writing about them, should the context be isolable from the reactions, emotional or otherwise, which it provokes. Neither is emotion something separate from thought; rather it's a flavouring which (working synaesthetically) colours one's thoughts. And this is how Mary's writing conveys the emotions Orthe arouses in Christie and, through identification with the protagonist, in the reader. Christie thinks and reacts as a diplomat, a wholly adequate government representative (though not always sure of her judgement), not as feminine or quasi-masculine. She responds to what's going on around her, reflects on that, rather than brooding about herself. This makes for lively and convincing depiction not only of her own character, but also that of Orthe. It also makes Christie easy to identify with.

Which brings up the matter of Sex Roles and Gender. The front-cover-flap blurb tells us that the Ortheans, until they reach adolescence, are neuter (shades of Left Hand of Darkness!), then they become either male or female. This differs from Le Guin's Winter, whose people are neuter except in kemmering when they could become either of the two sexes. Although not the same, comparison is inevitable. But this, like xenophobia, is more a strand among the myriad other strands knitted up into the story than a dominant theme.

To the xenoteam, confined to Iathcaer, the biology of the Ortheans is a mystery; Christie finds out on p. 104:

"'They're ashiren. How can you tell what sex ke will be until ke are adult?' That simple. Standing there in the sunlight, with the hissing of marhaz and the burning odour of the smithy: I thought, Adair, you had only to ask... 'You mean your young are born sexed?' Ruric was incredulous. 'Born adult?' 'You mean yours aren't?'"...

"How can you bring up a child if you don't know what sex it is? Some reactionary part of my mind protested. But I realized the question was nearly as meaningless to me as it would be to Ruric, and I let the subject drop."

Ruric, the military leader, is female; so is the political leader, Sutha-fiori; so is SuBannasen, who leads the opposition, anti-Dominion, faction. As envoy, Christie moves among these top levels, not a pawn, but a politically important piece. Women hold the positions of power. Such a pleasant change, these positive role models. After years of putting up with Heinleinesque

pneumatic dolls kowtowing to Heinleinesque all-competent prigs, 52% of the population is now starting to get characters they can identify with.

But not all the important, or bold characters are women. Blaise, Haltern and the Hexenmeister are all men (though the next Hexenmeister will be female). But male or female, brought up without discrimination, gender seems to make little difference compared to individual personalities. That's the message that comes through. Again, idea is buried under detail.

This is a book to be read for its detail, for immersion in the fine texture of its imagination. Idea is not absent; it is to be found, not in focussed and coherent form, but refracted into scattered facets, reflecting the variety of viewpoints with which Orthe is presented to us and which make Gentle's depiction of that world so seductively rounded.

(C) 1983 Judith Hanna

Dangerous Divisions

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Do we disagree with David Pringle's Halliwell/Martin/Scheuer best SF movies? I should think so! Any list which excludes Alien and Dark Star and includes Death Race 2000, must only go to show how blinkered these so called experts are.

A good film should be comprehensible, imaginative, well scripted, acted and directed, but above all enjoyable, leaving you with a sense of pleasure. It seems to be impossible to find 30 SF films in 30 years able to fulfill all these conditions, but we have compiled our own personal list;

Forbidden Planet (1956) / Alien (1979) / Dark Star (1974) / Incredible Shrinking Man (1957) / Day The Earth Stood Still (1951) / 2001 (1968) / Invasion of The Bodysnatchers (1956) / War of the Worlds (1953) / This Island Earth (1955) / Star Wars (1977) / Dr Strangelove (1963) / Them! (1954) / The Thing (1951) / The Fly (1958) / Scanners (1980) / Silent Running (1971) / Invasion of the Bodysnatchers (1978) / Planet of The Apes (1967) / Destination Moon (1950) / 1984 (1956) / On The Beach (1959) / Village of The Damned (1960) / Man With The X-Ray Eyes (1963) / Flesh Gordon (1974) / Altered States (1980) / The Andromeda Strain (1971) / Fahrenheit 451 (1966) / Zardoz (1973) / The Forbin Project (1970) / Demon Seed (1977).

Anyone else agreeing or disagreeing may like to participate in a survey. Please send us your lists of favourite 30 SF films, UK or USA, dating from 1950 to the end of 1980, and we shall be delighted to sort them into the most popular, and send the results to Vector. (((I cannot guess how many of you will be interested in doing Fay & David's list, but if there is a decent response I'll only be too happy to publish the results in Vector. As an addition to the survey, would you also tell us what you think were the worst Top Five films of the same period! -)))

Pringle's list of SF films was - er - strange. I am not sure how valid it is. The view you had was from outside the SF world - a good thing - but you should have balanced it more with views from inside. There are many SF film books for instance.

M. GREENER,
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Buntingford,
Herts.

A few comments on the list: 1) 2001 was a pseudo/scientific movie that left you reeling with the SF element, but it was a bore and was all froth, there was no real "message" behind it. A Clockwork Orange on the other hand was a film which looked good and had intelligence. The failure of 2001 made a Clockwork Orange possible. 2) Robinson Crusoe on Mars was a colourful and enjoyable exercise in movie junk. To include this and not Silent Running seems somewhat strange. Okay, Silent Running had many faults mainly in its plot, however it is a much better film than Robinson as towards the end it just gets silly with egyptian slaves running all over Mars! 3) At least Siegals "Body Snatchers" gets a better rating than Kaufmans. Siegel made a much better film than Kaufman did, and Kaufman had a range of post Star Wars effects to draw on. 4) The Man Who Fell to Earth was another film which looks good but is, in the end, an intellectual wasteland.

The problem with the list is not so much what it contains as opposed to what it leaves out. I assume Empire, Blade Runner and Android (the best SF film for years) failed to get in because of publishing dates. But what of Silent Running, Things to Come, Frankenstein, The Fly, Metropolis -- the list goes on. All of these should be ranked above Fantastic Voyage and Westworld which were just mass-audience entertainment afterall.

Hodder-Williams was not someone I'd read anything by. However, after the interview I think I will - this has opened my eyes to a new author. This should be the role of the BSFA but in my 4 years this has only happened half a dozen times. Still it was a good article. (((I'm glad you liked it. I would like to 'publish more interviews and articles on relatively unknown authors but apart from there being a limited number of 'unknowns'! I need more willing volunteers to produce the material.)))

MARY GENTLE,

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11 Alunhurst Rd,
Westbourne,
Bournemouth,
Dorset.

I wish that, for once, Paul Kincaid had broken the golden rule and discussed the ending of The Citadel of the Autarch a bit more thoroughly. I can't tell from what he says whether I disagree with him or not, but I did think the ending was more significant. It involves a mental change of position regarding the first three books, a reassessment of what was, after all, not

quite what the reader thought at first. Nor, from memory, does the 'science fictional climax' come two-thirds of the way through.. but then, you see, I'm not sure that we're talking about the same thing. I would like to know what Paul Kincaid thought of the religious aspects of the Book of the New Sun, and why he didn't stress them. (There's a Gene Wolfe story in a recent F&SF, called "A Solar Labyrinth", which I find to be the best exposition of the quartet; though it has nothing ostensibly to do with Severian's world, it does indicate the best way to approach the work.) On the other hand, I'm still trying to reserve the time to read straight through all four books in sequence, then I might have a better idea of what I mean... (((This is one case where Vector might beat you to the punch. Since the Wolfe books started I have been sending an extra copy of each volume to ex-Vector editor Mike Dickinson to do an overview of the whole series. Mike has now finished the article and I'm expecting it fairly soon.)))

You comment that "none of David Pringle's top 30 are as good as Gandhi?" I'm not quite certain on what standards I judge films - emotional impact rightly plays a larger part than in discussing the written word - but offhand I'd have to say no, none of that 30 are as good. 2001 comes close, having also philosophical concerns; as does CE3K, for being structured on the same kind of

messiah/apotheosis storyline. There are also arguments about Gandhi, concerning historical and political validity; but leaving those alone, the film had some profound human concerns. I can envisage an SF Gandhi, as Jeremy Crampton says, but I haven't yet seen it; I suspect this is because film-makers regard SF as primarily a technological rather than a human-orientated mode. Daft, and there are exceptions; but the emphasis at the moment is on special effects. I'm as much in favour of that Star Wars stuff as the next person, but I'd like to see the other stuff as well.

An aside: for charity's sake, will someone introduce Nigel Richardson to postal SF catalogues?? Granted it isn't a cheap way of buying books, but it does allow access to USA publications. I have every sympathy with his complaint. (At the risk of advertising, Fantast Medway in Wisbech is a good bet.)

David Pringle's survey is interesting, but leaves out two fine films: The Lathe of Heaven and The Bedsitting Room. I think the latter is a gas, better really than Lathe, dyed-in-the-wool Le Guin fan that I am; and the somewhat obscure Dark Star is also far better than the ones given higher ratings by Pringle's reviewers. In fact, it's not included at all, along with these other two I've mentioned. This leads me to speculate that 1) These authors don't review obscure films; 2) They don't like obscure or off-the-wall films 3) They don't like humorous SF. (Dark Star is also humorous.) I'm glad that On The Beach got such a high rating, however. Chris Priest wrote a couple issues ago about living under the threat of nuclear war and explained how as a child he thought he could escape the threat by living just a few miles away from a target, or else behind some rocks. I never had that illusion: I saw On The Beach as a child. It so scared me that it took three showings before I was able to see the whole thing through. I have often thought that subsidizing the free showing of this film around the world would be a good step in a program to promote nuclear disarmament. (((A couple of weeks ago On The Beach was shown on TV, considering its age it is still a very strong portrayal of the effects of nuclear war.)))

"April in Paris" by Ian Watson is charming & witty - while a whole issue of such would be too much, it was a nice contrast to the rest of Vector, which has been leaning towards the solemn and ponderous lately. His last paragraph, in which he hints at what he thinks is wrong with SF and offers a sort of solution, sounds incredibly intriguing: I hope he's able to write a column on "becoming somebody else" and how it applies to SF. It sounds like a major article to me. (And I have to agree with his suggestion that The Book of the New Sun is a "sword and sorcery novel without a plot written by someone supremely literate", albeit reluctantly.) (((I'm glad you like the Watson piece, next issue we should have the continuation of his piece, which I am greatly looking forward to. There is a danger that Vector can become 'solemn and ponderous' which is one reason for the existence of the Into Arena Column. While the by-line of Vector is 'the critical journal of the BSFA' this does not mean that every article must be a critical appreciation of this or that, the magazine has a much wider scope than that.)))

HILARY J. WILSON,
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I am a new member of the BSFA although I've been reading, watching and collecting SF for about 13 years now (I started early). It's a wonderful feeling to know that there's someone "out there" who likes the same things as yourself. Apparently you're

a bit off if you like SF, or so it seems, but if you're a woman who likes SF then one is viewed with something between disbelief, skepticism and a touch

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of insanity. So I was delighted with all the 'bumf' that popped through my door - Vector, Paperback Inferno, Membership List (yes - it makes quite interesting reading and proves that SF is more a male preserve than a female one) and Matrix. I'm still puzzling over the latter somewhat. I don't think I'm into fanzines and groups yet.

However, this does all have a point, several actually. I'm following the advice you gave us all in the 115th issue of Vector and am standing on a soapbox, with specific reference to your anguish over trash and apathy. I wholeheartedly agree. So it was quite ironic when I saw the cover of Matrix no.48. - what I feel can only be called TRASH lying on the BSFA's own doorstep. I suggest you have a look yourself. These days SF seems to be lost among a welter of "Star Wars"-type saga, more fantasy, horror and comic strip. Admittedly SF does cover a vast range of literature and art but is the 'core' being lost, smothered by the more publicised aspects?

In my own little way I'm trying to show that SF does not consist primarily of "Star Wars", Dr.Who and Superman, that there is as good/better SF like "2001", "Dark Star", "Fahrenheit 451", "Silent Running", "Stalker" etc. Heavens, I even ran a short General Studies course for the Sixth Form at school on various aspects of SF. I lend the occasional good SF book like The Left Hand of Darkness, Nightfall One, well, what I consider to be 'good', not just pure 'escapism' although escapism does have value.

The BSFA might assist in furthering a better image of SF by not publishing revolting and totally irrelevant "art" (and I use that word very loosely, believe me). I am not likely to leave Matrix lying around the flat or in the starroom in the hope that someone will pick it up and read it out of curiosity. My first reaction was to tear up the copy - and I'm a confirmed SF fan!)

If that's the "best" cover design then the Matrix editor would serve us better with a plain cover. (((While Hilary's is just one of many letters complaining about the Matrix cover, it is the only letter I'm going to publish. This is not an attempt to censor the letters - I'll send copies of all those relevant to the Matrix 'Editor' for him to publish - but simply because I do not want to waste space in Vector on the subject. I've taken Hilary's letter as it is a typical example and also because it goes someway to expressing my own views.)))

Well, having got that out of my system I must say that I find Vector to be a most interesting and stimulating publication - especially the 'behind-the-scenes' articles and also those articles about the ideas in books, thinking particularly of the one by Nik Morton 'We Are Just Statistics' in the last issue. A friend once said to me that the main disadvantage of SF was that the characterisation was poor, the books are all about ideas. Well, the first could be disputed hotly or not, depending on the SF writer but I would contend that the unfolding and expansion of an idea in the arena of an SF book is not a disadvantage at all. For me it's a strong point. There are so many ideas and themes treated time and again, by different people, and as time goes on approaches to these ideas or even the ideas themselves change. I recently read Make Room! Make Room! by Harrison. I was tickled to find it based in a New York of 35 million only 17 from hence. But when it was written the population explosion was a very popular theme. I have yet to come across a modern book which looks more realistically at a Calcutta, Sao Paulo, Rio de Janeiro etc of 35-million, which is now far more likely. It is this sort of thing that makes SF alive and relevant, what I call the 'Now what if-' factor.

(((That just leaves us with letters from Johnny Black (which Matrix should be publishing, Ian McKeer and David Barrett. Both of which I'll publish next issue. Until then....)))

COUNTING LITTLE STARS

Ann Morris

David Pringle's article in Vector 114 poses several interesting questions. He has made a list of the top 30 science fiction films, using the assessments of film critics Halliwell, Martin and Scheuer.

(1) There are over 30,000 entries in these three books. Did he plough through them all? And if so, what definition of SF had he in mind while doing so? The list of SF films which he offers demonstrates that the SF film contains elements of many other genres, particularly fantasy and horror, but also thriller, romance, art, satire, socio-political comment. Patently obvious, you might say, but how does a Vector reader recognise a SF film - by its title, or because he's seen it, or because of some intuitive SF faculty?

(2) The question of "objective criteria" is problematical. He chose these books because of their system of grading, which, by taking the composite scores, irons out "individual idiosyncracies". The Introduction to each book warns that the system of grading is not objective. Maltin, for example, says "We regard this book as an information guide, and make no pretense that our subjective ratings are the final judgment on any movie." Thus, by adding up these scores, the underlying subjectivity is not eradicated, but enhanced. CE3K at level 17 with 8 stars receives 4 points from both Maltin and Scheuer, but nothing from Halliwell. Whereas far above, at level 8 with 9 stars, Village of the Damned has reached that height because Scheuer has awarded the maximum score of 4.

(3) Why the cutoff point of 7 and the limitation of anglo-american films between 1950 and 1979? The latter point is best illustrated by two examples. (a) The War Game has been banned from general distribution in the UK since 1967; Halliwell does not mention it, but Maltin awards 2.5 stars and Scheuer the maximum 4. (b) Solaris, which is Red in origin, gets no mention in Maltin's book, but receives 2 and 3 stars respectively from Halliwell and Scheuer. These are but two examples where "individual idiosyncracies" have not been ironed out. Since most films are made in English-English or American-English, the limit on anglo-american films is not only sensible, but nicely expedient. Nothing personal or subjective of course, just a gentleman's agreement: the English can keep their skeletons and the Americans can keep their (limited) xenophobia.

(4) David Pringle argues that nothing prior to 1950 was labelled as SF. In what sense is "label" used - definition or description. If he is using it as a definition, I agree - because no-one has yet produced a coherent viable definition of science fiction which would apply to every film made since 1902 to the present date. If he is using it as a description, then I disagree, especially since he argues that the tradition of "fantasy and horror films" are "another matter". Fantasy and horror were, are and probably will continue to be elements within the SF genre.

The term 'science fiction' may not have been in general use before 1950 but people had long been familiar with its type. They had been watching Metropolis, Frankenstein, Hands of Orlac, Things to Come, The Invisible Man, Flash Gordon and Buck Rogers, for years. They had also been reading pulp magazines, with wonderfully vivid covers, which dealt with space exploration, marauding aliens, deathrays and strange new worlds. The abrupt decline of interest in the 1940's can be traced to something called The Second World War, at the end of which America incinerated the populations of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. And Buck Rogers was not flying the Enola Gay. The 'science' in SF had overtaken the 'fiction' and people were rather uneasy. Aliens and deathrays were no longer comfortable escapism - they had arrived, bringing 'Things', 'Invisible Men', 'Invasions' and dreadful radioactive mutations.

The resurgence of interest in SF during the 1950's came as a reaction to the fears engendered during the latter part of the 1940's by The Bomb, The War and The Communist Menace. The astonishing boom in science fiction was due to (a) a sense of paranoia which could be eased only by "watching for the mutant" (in John Wyndham's phrase) and then not always successfully as seen in, for example, Invasion of the Bodysnatchers (1956); (b) the impetus, paradoxically, given to science fiction (physics, astronomy, space flight) - something which seems never to have been recognised or acknowledged.

(5) Since David Pringle did not explain where he obtained his choice of SF films, and because I was alarmed at the prospect of analysing 30,000 entries (which did not always carry the label SF), I turned to Peter Nicholls' SF Encyclopedia. This lists 283 films. Following Pringle's methodology, I checked each film within the three books mentioned and was left with a total of 59 which had been awarded 7 stars and above. This list follows section 6. To derive a more exact comparison with his list, I excluded all films released prior to 1950. That left 50 films. If you have read the list and wondered what The Man in The White Suit is doing up top with 11.5 points, you will have to see the film or read a synopsis.

(6) In conclusion I would suggest that the evaluation of SF films is as much a matter of personal preference to the cinema critic, the filmgoer or the SF fan. There is no Platonic 'ideal' SF film, of which all SF films are but a shadow, any more than there is a similar Platonic 'ideal' of romance or mystery film. The equation of 'quality' with 'composite number of points awarded by x number of film critics' is false: this presupposes that (a) cinema critics are infallible and (b) that individual subjectivity is eradicated by the methodology used. I have avoided discussion of the many other issues raised by David Pringle's article, preferring simply to produce another list, which is similar in composition, but derived from one specific source.

RANKING	STARS	TITLE	H	M	S
1.	12	[King Kong (1933)]	4	4	4
2.	11.5	The Man in The White Suit (1952)	4	3.5	4
3.	11	*Dr. Strangelove (1963)	3	4	4
		[Frankenstein (1933)]	4	3	4
		*Invasion of The Bodysnatchers (1956)	4	3.5	3.5
		*2001 (1968)	3	4	4
4	10.5	The Birds (1963)	3	3.5	4
		[Dr. Jeckyll and Mr. Hyde (1933)]	4	3	3.5
		Dr. No (1963)	3	3.5	4
		*Planet of the Apes (1967)	3	3.5	4

<u>RANKING</u>	<u>STARS</u>	<u>TITLE</u>	<u>H</u>	<u>M</u>	<u>S</u>
		*Star Wars (1977)	3	3.5	4
5	10	*Failsafe (1964)	3	3.5	3.5
		[The Invisible Man (1933)]	4	3.5	2.5
		The Manchurian Candidate (1962)	3	3.5	3.5
6	9.5	Journey to The Centre of the Earth (1959)	3	3	3.5
		*On The Beach (1959)	2	4	3.5
		[Things To Come (1936)]	4	3	2.5
7	9	*Invasion of The Bodysnatchers (1978)	2	3	4
		[Lost Horizon (1937)]	1	4	4
		*Them! (1954)	3	3.5	2.5
		20,000 Leagues Under the Sea (1954)	2	4	3
		*Village of the Damned (1960)	2	3	4
8	8.5	*A Clockwork Orange (1971)	1	3.5	4
		*Day The Earth Caught Fire (1962)	2	3	3.5
		*Day The Earth Stood Still (1951)	2	3.5	3
		[Devil Doll (1936)]	2	3	3.5
		*Forbidden Planet (1956)	2	3.5	3
		*The Incredible Shrinking Man (1957)	2	3	3.5
		*The Thing (1951)	2	3.5	3
		The President's Analyst (1967)	1	4	3.5
		*Seconds (1966)	2	3.5	3
9	8	*The Andromeda Strain (1971)	2	2.5	3.5
		Everything you wanted to know about sex (1972)	1	3	4
		*Close Encounters of the Third Kind (1977)	0	4	4
		[Island of Lost Souls (1933)]	1	3.5	3.5
		*Sleeper (1973)	1	3	4
10	7.5	*Charly (1968)	1	3.5	3
		*Fahrenheit 451 (1966)	1	3	3.5
		The Forbin Project (1970)	2	3	2.5
		The Illustrated Man (1969)	1	3	3.5
		[Man Love (1935)]	2	3	2.5
		*The Man Who Fell to Earth (1976)	1	3.5	3
		*Robinson Crusoe on Mars (1964)	2	2.5	3
		Quatermass and The Pit (1968)	2	3	2.5
		*The Time Machine (1960)	1	3	3.5
		Slaughterhouse 5 (1972)	1	3	3.5
		*War of the Worlds (1953)	1	3.5	3
11	7	Donovan's Brain (1953)	1	3	3
		*Death Race 2000 (1975)	1	2.5	3.5
		*Fantastic Voyage (1966)	1	3.5	2.5
		*It Came From Outer Space (1953)	2	2.5	2.5
		Naked Jungle (1954)	1	3	3
		*1984 (1956)	1	3	3
		Mysterious Island (1961)	1	3	3
		Seven Faces of Dr. Lao (1964)	1	3	3
		Superman (1978)	0	3.5	3.5
		Silent Running (1972)	1	3	3
		*This Island Earth (1955)	2	2.5	2.5
		*Westworld (1973)	2	3	2

APPENDIX 1

Some comments are required on the previous list: the letters 'H', 'M' and 'S' stand for Halliwell, Maltin and Scheuer respectively. The figures below each letter indicate the number of points awarded by each compiler. Films within square brackets are those which have been included for interest, but do not comprise the magic total of 50. Films which are prefaced with an asterisk are those mentioned in David Pringle's list.

It may be asked why King Kong receives the ultimate accolade of 12 stars. First, it was included in the list because it was in Nicholls' SF Encyclopedia; secondly, it is described by Halliwell as "as monster movie", by Maltin as a version of "beauty and the beast" and by Scheuer as "classic Monster film." Should one dispute its inclusion, let us see what our critics say of Them! Halliwell: "...post atomic monster animal cycle", Maltin: "...giant ant mutations..", Scheuer: "SF thriller...treated more like a murder mystery than the shock approach usually employed in such SF films". Each critic agrees that both films deal with monsters, but Them! (9 stars) receives less acclaim and is actually described as SF by Scheuer.

The term "SF" is used quite indiscriminately by all critics, but is most often applied to films of which they disapprove. We can now look at the descriptions applied to two films within five categories, which can be regarded as applicable to SF.

MONSTER MOVIE

As described above, our critics go into raptures over King Kong which regrettably is not in our list because we are talking about the 1933 version. King Kong is one monster; Them! has dozens of the beasts. Both Scheuer and Maltin described Them! as SF, though Scheuer calls it a "thriller". He adds that it is more of a "murder mystery" than a shock-horror SF film. Murder, mystery, monster, mutation - disparate descriptions of two similar SF films.

BLACK COMEDY

Dr. Strangelove is a "black comedy" for Halliwell, as it is for Maltin, though Scheuer calls it simply "a masterpiece". The President's Analyst, however, is for Halliwell "a wild political satirical farce"; Maltin thinks it is a "nutty brilliant satire" and Scheuer's opinion is: "a spy spoof...rewarding satire". None mentions SF in either film.

PARANOIA (OR REFLECTIONS ON SOCIAL CONDITIONS)

Here we are spoiled for choice, particularly with American cinema of the 1950's. However, let's see what our critics make of Invasion of the Body-snatchers (1956). Halliwell says it's "low budget SF", Maltin says it's "classic, chilling SF" but Scheuer says it's "one of the better thrillers". Since paranoia is such a marvellous subject, involving persecution, and offering endless opportunities for the SF film, we'll look at two more. The Forbin Project and Westworld deal with more modern fears: computers, androids, robots. In the former (Forbin) a wicked computer tries to usurp its creator and impose peace on the world (shock-horror). Halliwell: "SF for intellectual adults"; Scheuer: "computer runs amok, pits wits against scientists in attempting to take over"; Maltin: "Suspense thriller! Computer runs amok, superior intelligence sabotages man's efforts at every turn, chilling and believable." Westworld: "unusual amusing melodrama"; Scheuer: "science goes haywire, disappointing future schlock"; Maltin: "engaging fantasy". So our

critics think that the Paranoia SF film is chilling, chilling, chilling, low budget SF, SF for intellectual adults, a thriller, a suspense thriller and an amusing melodrama and engaging fantasy but, uh, believable.

HORROR

Another golden opportunity for SF film makers. The Thing (1951) manages to confuse all three critics. Halliwell: "curiously drab suspense shocker"; Scheuer thinks it is a "thrilling" futuristic monster melodrama" but Maltin considers it "Top SF" although he considers the Carpenter remake contains "slimy, repulsive special effects which turn (it) into a freak show and lose the suspense". (Yet Maltin awards it 1.5 stars and gives Alien 2.5 stars despite its "space-age horror (with) stomach-churning violence, slime and shocks". Halliwell was too late to mention it, but Scheuer awards Alien 2 stars and the judgment: "thin horror thriller, overly dependent on slimy gruesomeness and badly milked suspense".)

How about Quatermass and the Pit? - Some nasty moments there. Halliwell: "...the most ambitious (of the three Quatermass films).. inventive and enjoyable.. too intellectual (for) a visual thriller..climax is satisfactorily harrowing". (2 stars for The Thing and 2 stars for Q and The Pit from Halliwell....) Maltin: "good cast, great script complications and suspense.."; Scheuer: "Are creatures from outer space menacing modern London? The old sci-fi question is suspensefully examined in a good one for the buffs."

FANTASY

First: Lost Horizon. Halliwell - "Utopian..Hollywood Moonshine.."; Maltin: "Classic..haunting finale..rare movie experience.."; Scheuer: "Lovely, strange, moving..romance and nostalgia". Second: Close Encounters (not Stars Wars, though that was tempting, but it is farther from Lost Horizon's atmosphere); Halliwell - "Slender fantasy..masterly technical effects.. benevolent mysticism (which) fitted a current requirement of popular taste.. accounting for its enormous box office success"; Maltin: "Superb intelligent SF.. powerhouse special effects...an enigma"; Scheuer: "less about extra-terrestrial visitors than about an obsession with images."

APPENDIX 2

I hope that the previous section has made it clear that 'Counting Little Stars' is neither a branch of statistics nor a true measure of a film's worth. Despite a seeming consensus in the top 50 list, there are wild anomalies. These become more apparent when examining the original data, i.e. the critics' evaluations. The words "thriller, suspense, shock, fantasy" occur repeatedly; the term "SF" is used intermittently, and with no consistency.

This ensures that any film within the nebulous category of SF can be evaluated according to how the critic sees the main substance - thriller, shock, fantasy". Since there is no precise definition of SF, the cinema critic may view a film which SF devotees regard as SF, as being an example of black comedy or fantasy or thriller - and only secondarily SF, if at all.

The logical conclusion, unfortunately, is that one cannot compile a list of "top" SF films which are both "good" SF and "good" cinema. The basic premises have not been established; if (a) = SF and (b) = film and (c) = high quality, (a) and (b) are neither necessary nor sufficient reasons for the conclusion (c). Counting little stars or listing films brings one no closer to a true appreciation of the SF film per se, - something which, paradoxically, the cinema critic may understand more than the science fiction critic.

THE LIBERATION OF FICTION

Michael Soper

Science Fiction authors have often felt dissatisfied with the forms they have had to write in; the new wave of the sixties and the condensed novels of J.G. Ballard indicated a strong feeling that the story form either as a novel or short story was deeply inappropriate for many SF themes. Much of the limitation stems from the linearity of the book and the requirement that the work be accessible and readable. Suppose the theme is time and the separate development of alternative futures; does it seem really appropriate to write this as a segmented single narrative, as one must do when restricted to paper?

There is light at the end of the tunnel; one can now construct non-linear fiction using home computers with moderate memory. Programmes can be written to scroll stories with random alternative points, so that a number of different plots can exist at the same time, and characters can make different decisions on different occasions. That is, linearity can be banished. Even colour animated displays can be included. There are two problems: one is the lack of standardisation of magnetic media for the storage of these long programmes, the other is that insufficient experimentation has been done for a natural form to emerge which uses the medium most efficiently and flexibly. Memory is no longer a problem as it is becoming cheaper and more plentiful. Now more than ten thousand words can be placed in 40K of random access memory, and if files are used, whole novels can be placed on disk.

This is a new active medium, the reader can interact with the form, but some thought must be given to the ways of doing this non-trivially. Stopping the story and saying 'what would you do?' is not quite enough. This, because of its flexibility, seems the ideal place for SF to generate a new form natural to itself; to leave the mainstream novel behind and move into the future. The new form can be naturally pictorial: visual information is more concise in computer memory than pages of words, and evolutionary: the form can learn from the reader. In this area, then, we can generate a new form much more appropriate to SF.

Those who saw 'Hitchhiker' on BBC TV will be able to imagine the kind of form that could emerge, but even there the form was much too linear. To show what can be done even at the purely verbal level, without bothering with illustrations or animated graphics, let us consider how a writer could use this new medium: firstly for a very long work he would use the computer to process what he was writing whilst he wrote - on the simplest level the computer would build a vocabulary, storing each word that had not appeared previously on top of the stack and coding it by a pair of characters that are added to a long string representing the work so far; thus even the most linear story is not stored as words but as a long string of characters and a vocabulary key. Doing this increases the amount of text that can be stored in the accessible memory. A conservative formula for the number of characters corresponding to N words is given by $2 + 6.3 (.6) (\text{Cog } N - 1)$ per word, assuming N is larger than 300. This may seem a rather pedestrian detail, but then to use this form efficiently and capably the writer must be able to programme. By interspersing the sections of text with short programmes such as illustrations, decision routines and graphics, the work takes shape. However, this is not being very imaginative: why not let the computer do more work?

Some games programmes let the computer choose from alternative sets of adjectives and nouns to construct sentences for different nouns, and although this is not directly applicable to the kind of work we envisage, it shows what is already being done on small programmes. Four parameters can be defined, say character, mood, place, and action; the value of the parameters deciding which character, what mood, what place, and which action. The programme can then operate with the parameters, and this can be made reasonably natural in practice.

Programmes have been written to create children's stories using a limited numbers of facts and a large programme, although the stories are twee they are quite good in their way. Of course, before the century is out, computers will have been programmed to write novels every bit as good as those that are frequently published today, and since publishers would have an economic motive for using a machine product (since they could own the computers) writers will have to improve the quality of their output to make it competitive. In the long run, however, the machines can keep on improving, whereas we cannot, because a writer does not always understand why his novels differ in quality. The best policy for writers is the modification of the novel form before this situation arises, to a form much more difficult for the machine; perhaps more poetic but also using computer techniques for flexibility and interactivity with the reader. People who doubt this prognosis should check up and find out what is currently being done in Artificial Intelligence.

Careful thought must be given to the use of this new medium in a sensitive and creative way. It would be depressing if the medium were used for forms that were little more than games. Also a determined effort would have to be made to ensure that there is a high degree of standardisation in the use of magnetic media so that the works are not restricted to one small class of machines. There would be a strong economic motive for publishers to give away or sell cheaply their own micro-computer based machines for use with the new form, thus ensuring that only their 'books' could be read on them. The same machines could be used for fiction and programmed learning aids. Perhaps the fact that the programmes can grow and become somewhat autonomous is the most exciting freedom that the new form has. The fictional forms can grow each time they are switched on: the characters can change slowly with time, the plot can alter, the programme can infer new facts about the story situation, it can learn new facts from the reader; but it's important to add that the author controls at the outset the fixity or otherwise of the structure, although if the structure is very free and uses randomness he cannot always predict what his creation will grow like.

Something can be done on these lines almost straight away: the BSFA can decide on a popular standard machine (the Spectrum say) and writers can create, copy and sell cassettes on their works in the new form, bypassing the publishers' monopoly. A Cassette can cost as little as 50p and take less than 15m to fill automatically from the machine, thus with only one cassette deck 32 cassettes can be produced per day; with professional equipment, many more: a much cheaper operation than publishing. Organisation and cooperation are required to set this up.

But why bother, why change? Paper is cheap and can be printed in bulk cheaply, and to read a book one does not need a computer.

This is a new form, and worth investigating; in a sense the future popularity of programmed learning aids will create the technology, but why not get ahead of the trend and use it for fiction? Let the writers control the situation ab initio, and create the form they need. It would be nice if artistic criteria ruled for once rather than commercial interests. New writers, too, could adopt the new form and be read, for at the moment many publishers only publish for the money that works by established authors bring. The form can be created for short works now. And we will not be destroying trees to publish our work.

INTO THE ARENA!

SO WHAT'S NEW?

My thoughts on the Bomb.....

Barrington J. Bayley

Many people will not know that I was trained for nuclear war. No, I wasn't arming the bombs or speeding bravely Stalingradwards in a subsonic bomber. I was to be on the receiving end. But not quite, either. With luck, and the lengthy prewarning politicians then and now insist will precede nuclear attack (with what justification I have never been able to fathom) I would have received my reserve call-up notice and be placed outside the target areas.

This was in 1957, still close enough to World War II for atomic war to seem, well, almost natural. The cold war, then, had a paranoid quality it is hard to appreciate now. A few months after the time I am speaking of, I was hauled out of a pub by Scotland Yard on suspicion of being a Soviet spy. That was what you got for discussing atomic tests in West End pubs in those days - some eavesdropper had made a phone call. (Wanta hear the whole horror story of my life? Previously I had also been a guinea pig at Porton Down, where I was dosed with nerve gas.)

What happened was that at the end of our two years national service loads of us air force blokes were sent on a month-long course in firefighting. After nuclear attack a lot of the country would be on fire, and it was to be our job to put it out. It was a pretty good, interesting course (though my most vivid memory is of the instructors trying to stifle their mirth at my falling over the hoses I was supposed to be running out), and the preparations, I thought, were impressive. As you can imagine, rather more water would be required to deal with the conflagration than was likely to be found in any particular spot, so it was to be pumped from the sea, through a network of pipelines we were to set up in hours. We practised clipping together lengths of big polythene pipe as they were thrown out of the back of a lorry, connecting them at intervals to very efficient portable pumps powered by an adapted racing car engine, or something like that.

Remember the Green Goddess fire engines that were trundled out during the firemen's strike? This scheme is the reason they were there. We were trained on them, and a vast number were stashed away somewhere to await the Day. I shudder to recollect it. Any sprog among us who had ever driven anything, whether he had a licence or not, was allowed to take the wheel of one of those things and go careering about the countryside.

Five strikes were anticipated: London, Birmingham, Manchester, Glasgow, and I forget where the fifth was due (I will not unkindly suggest making doubly sure of either Glasgow or Birmingham). It was assumed they would be big

bombs. My memory is hazy over details, but I seem to recall that no operations were planned within a radius of thirty-five miles. After some weeks, we were told, teams might be sent in to take a look.

Why only five bombs? Because five were sufficient, from the enemy's point of view. But really, because many more than that and there was scarcely any point in laying these plans...

Well, here we are a quarter of a century later, the Green Goddesses are out of date, I don't know what happened to the Great Firefighting Scheme but I imagine it has been quietly discarded, and the bombs still haven't arrived. What went wrong?

Seriously, it has occurred to me to move my family and myself to Ireland and relative safety. (We live next door to an army depot at present. Half a mile off course and the SS20 warhead could detonate directly over my chimney). But in Ireland my children would have to go to catholic schools run by the church, would have to be attending confession and mass and whatever all the time, and would be raised in the looniest society on Earth.

Faced with the choice between Irish religion and the Bomb, I elected to stay here, and at least give them a chance.

Still, I have this nightmare. By some horrible mischance I have survived the nuclear holocaust. But so have hordes of Greenham Common peace women, all smugly screeching "We told you so!!"

That would be more than a body could bear.

To be properly serious, I have two attitudes to CND. I admire the people who have put their effort into it over the years. It's good to know somebody is trying to save civilisation. Perhaps it will influence the thinking of future generations. But, I must observe, that is all it can do. It cannot remove the peril that we are going to face. In all probability that peril will be removed; but by parties and means which, I suspect, would not meet the approval of some of CND's supporters.

The most that CND can achieve in the practical sense is the disarmament of our own country, and that is neither here nor there. Our standpoint then becomes a simple pacifist one: if we are attacked by a nuclear power we shall instantly surrender. Then the enemy will only hit us with one or two bombs, as a punishment or a frightener, or if we are submissive enough, perhaps not hit us at all.

But that does not spare us from a future enemy who decides to annihilate Britain purely from the motive of hatred; or because it is easier to have us all dead than to have to deal with us again at a later date. And, notwithstanding our view of ourselves as jolly good fellows, the world has plenty of people who hate us. My personal preference is that they should continue to fear us, also.

(There is, to be sure, a more general argument for renouncing nuclear weapons: 'Even if the enemy annihilate us, they at least will have survived, and civilisation will be able to continue. After all, suppose I am commander of a missile-carrying submarine. My country has just been utterly destroyed. I have received the order to carry out my duty and wipe out the majority of the population of the Soviet Union in retribution. Will I launch my missiles, murdering men, women and children by the hundred million? No, I don't think so. I think I might be more inclined to shoot the members of my crew who attempted to see to it that the order was carried out. But for that reason alone, I am a most unlikely commander of a Polaris submarine.)

Of course, there are wars and wars. Some are no more than scuffles, usually over some piece of territory somewhere (such as the recent scrap in the south Atlantic) where the winner takes the prize and the loser retires with bad grace to lick his wounds, muttering that there will be another time. The Argentinians could have felt no nervousness that we might nuke Buenos Aires (we wouldn't do that, would we, chaps?). Then there are more serious wars over who if anyone is to dominate or rule the region where the

belligerents both live. These can get quite bitter, and Europe has been the scene of many of them. Finally there are wars to the death, where one nation seeks to obliterate another. Such was the Hitler war against the Slav nations of eastern Europe.

It is war type 2 that the current argument seems to be centred on. Myself, I think the whole debate is a non sequitur. The only logical aim I can see in the currently peddled political line of 'multilateral disarmament', which means mutual disarmament by the western alliance and the Soviet Union, or of 'raising the nuclear threshold', is 'let's find a way not to use nuclear weapons so we can have a bloody good war, like we used to.'

Ask yourself what's new about nuclear weapons. The razing of cities, the wilful extermination of populations, the destruction of civilisation? None of these things are new. They are not even nearly new. They are old, old traditions.

Two things are new, and I will take newness No.1 first. It is that all this, instead of taking a long time, can now be accomplished in half an hour; and, at present, no one can defend himself against it.

But isn't that all to the good? Events that take a long time to develop are much more likely to come about by accident.

There's a supposedly true story of a contest of nerves between an English officer and a French officer. Each was to sit on a barrel of gunpowder and light the fuse. The winner was to be he who stayed on his barrel longest.

The Englishman's nerve broke first and the Frenchman won. But that was because he knew that, actually, the barrels were empty.

Would the death-struggle between Germany and Russia have taken place if both those countries had been armed as we now are? No, it would not. But don't take my word for it. Listen to the master of terror himself: Adolf Hitler, the man who described 'the overwhelming fear of immediate death' as the most effective political instrument.

When Peenemunde finally got the V2 working Hitler, like most Nazi leaders, went to have a look at it. Now the big feature of the V2, as the Germans saw it, was its invulnerability: once launched, there was absolutely no defence against it. Hitler immediately decided that here was a war-winning weapon. Disappointed that it could carry only one ton of high explosive, he declared that he wanted 'annihilation effect', and ordered a first salvo of 30,000 missiles to be fired against London (only 10,000 had been manufactured by the war's end).

At the same time, Hitler made an interesting remark to his aide. "From now on wars will become impossible. Humanity will not be able to bear it."

Though not knowing whether the atomic bomb was even practicable (a mixture of accident and funk on the part of German physicists seems to have kept him in the dark about that) he had correctly prophesied the nuclear age.

It is largely on Hitler's reassurance that I fail to feel that we are tottering constantly on the edge of annihilation. One has to distinguish here between the irrational and the merely wicked. Despite being 'a monster of wickedness', as Churchill called him, Hitler was rational. Of course, it might be debatable whether the war-preventing properties of the Bomb are in all circumstances a good thing. A few decades-worth of technical progress would have held Hitler back from his fatal adventure, ensuring the survival of Nazi Germany, with the consequence that the doctrine of the master race would today be respectable and fashionable, as Marxism is... Be that as it may, I base my lack of real alarm on the belief that the leaders of North America, Western Europe and the Soviet Union, however else they might be criticised, are at least as rational as Hitler. Some evidence of their rationality comes from the fact that the 'arms limitation' agreements are in reality the reverse - what they ensure is that there remains no defence against nuclear attack: no anti-ballistic-missile system, no first-strike-without-response; that the weapon the rocket engineers put in Hitler's hands stays invulnerable, that there is gunpowder in the barrels, and if you're stupid enough to light the

fuse then you bloody well stay on till the end.

The trouble is, we then come to Newness No. 2...

Newness No. 2 is only slowly emerging. It is that the capability for mass destruction ceases to be the special preserve of large, powerful nations. It becomes available to all, even to poor, ill-organised states, or to private armies.

There is no guarantee of rationality in the weltering world at large. Racial nationalism (the political foundation of those two small nations said already to have equipped themselves with nuclear arsenals), fanatical religion, wanton violence, holy war, insane pride, crazed dictators with as little regard for the survival of their own countries as for anyone else's, emotionally unstable, with every kind of mental aberration - the wide world has them all, and the Bomb will shortly be at their service.

It is mainly countries like ourselves, long possessors of these weapons, who proceed to sermonise on how abhorrent they are. Others can't wait to get their hands on them, such as the black African professor - I think a Nigerian - who recently gave a series on talks on radio. The titles - 'Africa's Humiliation', etc. etc. - give some indication of their tone. Turning on the radio for some background noise one day, I found myself listening to one of these talks, in which he outlined what the future history of Africa was to be. First on the programme, of course, was the revolution in South Africa, after which (one could glean from his tone of satisfaction) the whole continent would be in the hands of the Negro race, which was as it should be. About the next stage our softly-spoken professor was equally unequivocal. Africa must develop the nuclear bomb. The nannies of white northern children, he said, used to tell them that if they didn't behave a big black man would come and get them. "What the world needs is a big black man waving nuclear weapons to frighten northern politicians into doing as they are told."

This educated savage should be heeded. He's pointing us into the future. And he's not arguing: he's telling us.

From what direction might our peril come, as the 21st century rolls along? An Ayatollah, enraged by some British insult to Allah and the Prophet, sending his nuclear Sword of Islam to cleanse the Earth? A grinning Idi Amin, munching human liver, bent on exterminating the white race so that Africa can take its place in history? Will it be a future Galtieri, maddened with machismo, and having another go at the Falklands, who pre-empts our possible recovery operation by doing what I was trained for in 1957, namely zapping London, Birmingham, Manchester, Glasgow and Birmingham - or Glasgow?

There are people who will object to these cameos because they are at odds with their wishes for the future. But no one's wishes have anything to do with it: they are only selective filters for gaining a false picture of the world. It's easy to know what's liable to happen in the future: just look at what happened in the past, or is happening now. Who would have thought the rulers of a country would institute a programme to exterminate between one third and one half of its own population? Yet that happened recently in Cambodia.

There was nothing unique or unprecedented about the Nazi death camps: that's what you've got to understand in coming to terms with the Bomb. As for war, it's as natural as rain. Man has an instinct for war. To believe otherwise is a species of religious delusion, like believing that the natural food of the tiger is grass. (A recent article in Watchtower, the journal of Jehova's Witnesses, explains that before the Fall of Man the tiger lived on grass. The entire animal kingdom was vegetarian, and will be again when God remakes the Earth.) Man is what he is: at his worst, the worst of the beasts in a savage world, capable of every conceivable...shall we say, unpleasantness?

Longterm peace is what is unnatural. It can only be maintained by artificial means, against the will of prospective belligerents. Actually, the horrors I have outlined above should be self-correcting. It is not

unimaginable, for instance, that the loopy dictator of some parched, primitive state, whose illiterate subjects subsist on mealy meal and scratch the earth with a stick, could find the wherewithal to despatch a few thousand cheaply made nukes, skimming over land and sea in almost costless doodlebugs from a Japanese cash-n'-carry, to devastate a continent. All the nations of the world are at his mercy!

Who is going to put up with that?

Because of it, one can predict with fair probability the political shape of the 21st century. It will resemble the 19th, in being an age of empires. The imperative of security will cause the major powers, whoever they happen to be at the time, to divide the rest of the world up between them, and rule it -- firmly. It really is rather hard to see how else the world can be made safe.

Untrustworthy, unstable countries will doubtless be ruled outright. To others, varying degrees of 'limited sovereignty' can apply, ranging to almost complete independence - but with one well-understood condition. 'If it even begins to look like it has crossed your minds to arm yourselves, we shall occupy you by lunchtime. Or if we are feeling impatient, nuke you in our morning tea-break.' (Put the samovar on, Ivan)

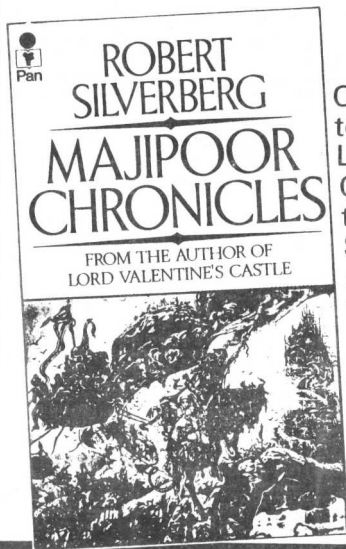
It could be worse. There have always been empires; there are empires now, and there's no reason to think there won't be more empires in the future. What will happen next is another question; history is persistently mutable. One argument CND has, I believe, is that if nuclear weapons continue to exist then the worst will happen sooner or later. If that is so then the case is hopeless, because the only way for them to disinvent themselves is to destroy the societies that know how to make them.

I've heard that this business of keeping the natives quiet was the sort of thing the British used to do fairly well. But not any more. Whose 'sphere of control' will we belong to in the new shake-out, I wonder?

Put the samovar on, Ivan...

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BOOK REVIEWS

VECTOR'S CHOICE

A CITY OF DREADFUL NIGHT

MARY GENTLE

[THE SHATTERED GODDESS by DARRELL SCHWEITZER. STARBLAZE/DONNING 1983, 183pp., \$5.95]

Few writers can genuinely touch the quality of nightmare. By that I don't mean the cataloguing of horror and gore that blurb-writers so often refer to as nightmare-like, but the fear that, formless and almost banal, stems from the sleeping mind. John Bellairs did it with The Face in the Frost: there is an American writer called James Blaylock (Del Rey have brought out two of his fantasies) who can do it. And now there is also The Shattered Goddess.

Fantasy can easily lose its credibility; being less mundane than other kinds of fiction, it treads a finer line. The mock-heroic, the mock-portentous; they make it easy to fall into the realms of the ludicrous. So it's as well that Schweitzer possesses the irony to diffuse that danger. Aware that there is a sense of humour present, one credits the wildly implausible - as indeed one does with Dunsany, of whose self-contained and ultimately pessimistic fantasies The Shattered Goddess is reminiscent. Here is that similar ironic tone, as the author speaks of his villain - 'It had long been noted that this witch must have been a kindly old lady despite her dire occupation, for she had so few enemies among the living.' Ouch.

But be warned that the humour is confined to the earlier part of the story, it soon turns to something darker. Nightmarish. This is a fantasy of a world in decay, a world whose Goddess is dead; and the city of Ai Hanlo and the people of Ranelcaine are living on borrowed time. The first portent is the appearance of a strange baby in the cradle with the royal child ("Do you suppose my wife had twins, and didn't tell me about it?" muses Tharanodeth, who takes wonders most pragmatically in his stride; naming the child Ginna, 'mystery'.) As Ginna grows, among the servants, he learns to hide his one magical talent of creating illusory globes of light.

Ai Hanlo is a city familiar to readers of science fiction and fantasy, but for all that is well presented - "that dome and the towers surrounding it comprise only that part of the palace which is visible from this side. And yet there is enough there for you to spend your whole lifetime exploring... And around the palace is a city, through which you could wander all your days, and still some of its ancient secrets would remain hidden. Yet consider how small they are seen from this distance. Just one mountain surrounded by hills, beyond which are wide plains and other lands."

With the death of Tharanodeth and the coronation of his son, the witch-influenced Kaemen, life in Ai Hanlo changes from gentle decay to barbarous cruelty. Ginna and the girl Amaedig flee, and it is their flight and evasions of pursuit that form the main sequence of the story, and have the unsettling

quality of evil dreams. It's something difficult to convey by quotation, being rather a cumulative effect than any particular quality in isolation; but this may give some idea of the spare prose, and its portrayal of the horror that lies on the border between shudder and laughter:

'...the screaming reached a crescendo.

'Just as suddenly the air was empty and there was silence. He looked around, puzzled, and poked the darkness with his staff. He thought himself alone.

'And then he realised that something heavy was dangling from the front of his shirt. He brought the light close to himself and looked down.

'It was the head, clenching the cloth in its teeth.

'He let out a shriek and brought the staff down on it, but missed, for those jaws which had hung slack now worked furiously, devouring the front of his shirt, climbing up him like a ravenous rat.'

The Shattered Goddess is an autotelic work, and should be taken on its own terms. Like Dunsany's fables of fate and time and the gods, the heroes are not men or women, but the blind processes of the natural universe (assuming that 'natural' includes what we might regard as super-natural or theological). Psychological nuances of characterisation, therefore, are not what the reader should be looking for.

The book has a tone all its own, though I was reminded at various points of Jack Vance and M John Harrison (particularly with the classification of cultures as Dawn, Afternoon, Twilight, etc); and I suspect influences go further back, to Dunsany and William Morris. And one could debate, as with Gene Wolfe's Book of the New Sun, whether treating the future as mythical and theological, instead of factual and technological, makes a work fantasy or science fiction. What it avoids is something one might call the Another-Bloody-Fantasy syndrome.

ABFs litter the shelves, usually originating in America; they feature feudalism (without the grinding poverty of its peasant-agrarian base), and a sanitised sword-and-sorcery; something that in its most fanatic manifestation one might call militarism-and-monsters. Essentially it's costume drama, with no more soul or strangeness in it than in a Walt Disney production. The Shattered Goddess has its monsters, but the dangers come across as real; it has soldiers, old and lost and without a cause; and it ends (if not unexpectedly) at least satisfyingly far away from mundane experience.

It has also Stephen Fabian illustrations that complement the atmosphere of the story; being a little stylised, in black and white, and with many shadows.

And the nightmares? Hadel of Nage, somewhere in the text, is credited with the remark that "all truth is revealed in dreams"; a quotation from a work entitled 'On Fears'.

XX

ANCIENT MARINER

PAUL KINCAID

XX

[REGENESIS by ALEXANDER FULLERTON. MICHAEL JOSEPH 1983, 364pp., 8.95]

It is 1990. A revolutionary new submarine is on trial in the depths of the Atlantic when the bomb is dropped. After buffeting in the ocean depths the submarine surfaces to find a devastated world. They begin a fruitless search for survivors, while undergoing themselves all the tensions of such an enclosed society. Then, suddenly, a Russian submarine appears upon the scene,

and though it proves to be weaponless it nonetheless engages in suicidal attacks upon the Americans. At last they are able, apparently, to shake off this dogged but insane pursuit and on the coast of Ireland stumble upon a small community of survivors. Miraculously, but conveniently, the all male crew of the submarine discovers that these survivors are practically all female, and sexy schoolgirls to boot. Of course the Russians reappear on the scene, and they have their own fell plans for the girls.

Regenesis is not exactly the most astoundingly original of the books I have read. Cliches proliferate like ants at a picnic, the only good Russian is a dead Russian and the rest of the time he is hell bent on killing every last American whatever the cost, there are convenient coincidences all over the place. And yet, I enjoyed it.

Regenesis is a real ancient mariner of a book, full of the two-fisted sort of prose that grabs your lapels and compells you to read. It is a taut, exciting action adventure. The numerous shortcomings only become apparent when the pace shows, and Fullerton doesn't allow this to happen too often. He is a master of timing, always knowing when to inject a little action, to keep the story on the boil and the reader on the hook. The first half of the book is set aboard the submarine *Arkansas*, obviously a realm in which Fullerton feels more at home. These scenes have a claustrophobic reality and a sense of technical accuracy that makes the reader more ready to accept what comes later. The characters, furthermore, have sufficient individuality to lift them out of the common rut of cardboard, though the naval types are by far the most believable and the few female characters are little more than names. Certainly the sense of people under pressure within the tight little world of the submarine has the breath of conviction.

It is not a demanding book, but it is an enjoyable and in its way thrilling read.



THE SONG OF EARTH

DAVID V. BARRETT



[CAT KARINA by MICHAEL CONEY. GOLLANCZ 1983, 220pp., £7.95 ISBN 0-575-03271-1]

You will all know *The Tale of Cordwainer's Trunk*, of how, after the death of the great scholar, his widow, Mrs Genevieve Lineburger, unearthed from a dusty trunk hidden in the attic, tales, parts of tales, and notes for parts of tales, and brought them to the light. And, the story continues, of how, somewhere hidden, there may be more yet to be discovered. Perhaps even a new fable from the far future's distant past about C'Mell, or another beautiful redheaded cat-girl, and of how she triumphed over prejudice and went on to change the destiny of mankind...

The parallels are unmistakable, yet Cat Karina is not a theft or a copy, or a pastiche, although it has remarkably similar characters and is told in something akin to Cordwainer Smith's unusual style.

Many thousands of years before the story begins, a potentially disastrous challenge to Earth is prepared for by the creation of 'specialists,' humans with animal genes - the large cats, monkeys, crocodiles, bears, llamas - by a geneticist, Mordecai N. Whirst, whose name lives on as an oath equivalent to 'God!' Although this explanation of the origin of the felinos, cai-men and others is probably necessary, it has the feel of an afterthought, and is perhaps the weakest part of the book.

The specialists, though as much people as the True Humans, have recognisable species-traits; those with monkey genes are small and nimble, those with a crocodile amongst their remote ancestors are cruel and vicious.

And all are treated as second class citizens by True Humans. On one level the whole book is a study of racial tension:

'Let go of my goddammed arm, you animal!'

'What did you call me!' Tonio tore himself free and set off up the yards, almost running.

The big felino paced alongside. 'Just what did you call me?' (p114)

Karina is one of four daughters of El Tigre, the leader of one felino community. She is 18 and beautiful, with 'the long supple limbs, the oval face and the slanting amber eyes of her people.'(p10) She is intelligent, quick-witted, and the natural leader of her 'grupo,' or siblings.

In the first few pages, Michael Coney skilfully introduces the reader to many of the major ideas of the book. Karina's leg is trapped between a guide rail and the supporting X-shaped crutch which holds up a monorail. The sailcars which travel this track, supported by side wheels running against the two guide rails, are to play a major part in the developing plot - and are almost the only facet of the old Coney (cf. the house yachts in *Charisma* (1975), the fishing skimmers in *Hello Summer, Goodbye* (1975), sling-gliding in *The Girl With A Symphony In Her Fingers* (1975) and the skitterbug regatta in *Brontomek!* (1976)) to be evident in this book, though the tumps, landwhales which provide food for the felinos, can be traced to the somewhat more aggressive landsharks of *Symphony*.

Karina subdues the pain with the aid of her 'Little Friends'; later we discover that these symbiotes mark her as genetically special. She is freed from a 'Perils of Pauline' situation (which Coney makes the more taut by under rather than over-playing it) by the intervention of 'the handmaiden' who heals her broken leg by smoothing it with a stone - evidence of a non-Terran technology. In return the handmaiden extracts Karina's promise that she will follow her guidance when faced with a number of decisions during the year. The handmaiden also tells her that -

'on certain happentracks of the Ifalong you will be famous, and the minstrels will sing of you.'

The suggestion was ridiculous. 'You mean like the Pegman and his songs?' said Karina sarcastically.

'Don't laugh about the Pegman's songs. They're important too, and in the distant future they'll be a part of the Song of Earth. All of human history will be told in songs like the Pegman's.' (p11)

The Ifalong is simply a new name for a familiar concept in SF, parallel time tracks. Although it is not possible to foretell the future, it is possible to foretell the most probable future in the Ifalong. And even if a desired event is somehow prevented from occurring in 'our' future, one can maximise the chances of its occurrence on other tracks by working towards it; hence the handmaiden's wish that Karina accept her guidance whenever there was a significant choice to be made.

The handmaiden's face is badly scarred by burns, and Karina's reaction illustrates the deep hold of the religious precepts of the time:

'Karina jerked away, her stomach churning at the awful, unnatural evil of that face. The woman was Cursed. Agni only touched those who sinned, and he made sure they stayed touched. So ran the Kikihuahua Examples.'

The Examples, which had been followed by True Humans and Specialists for forty thousand years, include:

'I will not kill any mortal creature

I will not work any malleable substance

I will not kindle the Wrath of Agni.

In this way you will take a step towards living in accord with your world and the creatures in it, which will be a step nearer to the Example of the kikihuahuas, and the Will of God. (p48)

But a sub-theme of the book shows that a religion which is right for one people and time may not be right for all, and that if the majority of people are, whether deliberately or unknowingly, not following its teachings to the letter, perhaps the religion should change to suit the people, rather than vice versa. For some reason, the book abounds with Latin American echoes: the names of El Tigre, Maquinista and Captain Guantelete, the sailcars 'Cavaquinho' and 'Estrella del Oeste,' grupo, kikihuahua, the vicuna, a S.American type of llama, and tortugas, the main True Human food, discoveries about which are crucial to the plot.

It is gratifying to see, splashed across the cover, 'Author of the British Science Fiction Award winner Brontomek!' (though the exclamation mark is missing), but the blurb irritated me by claiming that Brontomek! was Coney's last novel: 'Now, after a six year gap, Coney has returned to science fiction...' The point being, of course, that The Ultimate Jungle, which appeared half way through that gap, was not published by Gollancz. This is publishing chauvinism taken too far. It is bad enough that the list of books 'By the same author' excludes the four (including Szygyy (1973) which Gollancz didn't publish; that is standard practice. But misinformation, from the leading SF publisher in Britain, is not excusable.

The usual desire of the novelist is to persuade the readers that his story is true, hence the cliché 'suspension of disbelief,' which applies to all fiction, not just science fiction. But what do we mean by true? Like Cordwainer Smith in his 'Underpeople' stories, Coney begins this book by telling the reader that it is a tale; it is, in fact, part of the Song of Earth, and as such, it is more 'true' than any straight factual account of the same events could be. The minstrels, such as the Pegman,

'used their eyes and ears, listened to rumours and legends and dying old men. And they used their imagination, and their essential humanness. With these ingredients they created a whole new history of Mankind; a tapestry of events which was passed on word of mouth - and so could never become dull, inflexible, or accurate.

It is called the Song of Earth. (p5)

Like all living songs, this one is organic; it grows, it adapts to its environments, it incorporates new details in each telling. It allows for variants, which enables Coney in a couple of places to tell the tale of another happenstance, of what would have happened if Karina had ignored the handmaiden's guidance, as she often wished to. And it allows for characters in the tale to tell tales themselves, to relate legends, to sing songs of times past, so that it comes as a shock to the reader (though perhaps it shouldn't) to realise that a two page story related by a character is in itself a part of the overall story; the events of a legend may only be a few years old, its locale may be a place we have been, its characters may be people we know. And somehow, through this tale-telling technique, Coney achieves what all storytellers desire: his reader believes.

Coney has written good books before, particularly the loosely-related series which includes Mirror Image, Szygyy, Brontomek!, Charisma and The Girl with a Symphony in her Fingers. I was delighted to see the last two, my own favourites, in translation in an SF shop in a small town in France this summer. But Cat Karina surpasses all of these; a good SF writer has become a great myth-teller. A sequel might not be a good idea; the tale of Karina is told, and 'Further Adventures of...' might mar the essential simplicity of that tale. But the Song of Earth is endless, and must contain many more tales;

perhaps Coney will tell them to us.



HITHER-THITHER ACTION

JOSEPH NICHOLAS



[WHITE GOLD WIELDER by STEPHEN DONALDSON. COLLINS 1983. 509pp., £8.95]

There are times when I wonder whether Donaldson really understands what words mean. "The cold had become irrefragable", "the trees and vines rustled like excretion", "He was caught in the throes of a rupture so fundamental and puissant that it might tear Time asunder", "argute with concentration", "sunshine lay like immanence on the slopes", "Covenant's visage worked unself-consciously back and forth between leaping eagerness and clenched distress", "beneficent mansuetude", "blandished from side to side by the springy turf" - a misuse of the English language as ridiculous as it is unnecessary. Style is not readily separable from content, it's true - what one has to say influences the way one says it, and vice versa - but there is a point at which it is possible to state that the style is interfering with the content, that the way in which things are said is obscure or distracting. White Gold Welder passes this point on numerous occasions and, apart from making it more wearisome to read (some passages are so opaque that prolonged study is necessary before their meaning can be induced to crawl from its hiding place), such a weight of redundant verbiage serves only to pad the book out well beyond its natural length.

At least the book has more plot than The One Tree (reviewed by yours truly in Vector 109). Having failed to forge a new Staff of Law from the eponymous tree, Thomas Covenant and Linden Avery are returning to the Land with little idea of what to do next when their ship is blown off course and becomes trapped in (presumably) the fringes of the polar ice-cap. Leaving most of the crew aboard, they and a few companions set off on foot, fighting off attacks by ice-beasts called arguleh along the way, and on reaching terra firma commence a long march south towards Revelstone, meeting first a friend left over from The Wounded Land (who is killed shortly afterwards in another attack by the ice-beasts), then a number of Haruchai, the Bloodguards of the former Lords of Revelstone, and finally Sunder and Hollian, also left over from The Wounded Land. Breaking into Revelstone with the aid of a Sandgorgon (summoned from the desert of Bhrathairealm, a place encountered in The One Tree, although how it got from there to the Land is left unexplained), they managed to destroy the Clave, kill the Raver controlling Gibbon na-Mhoram, and extinguish the Banefire. End of part one.

So far so good - little padding, plenty of hither-thither action (not all of it contributing to the advancement of the plot), and all pretty much as expected (although the unarmed heroics of the Haruchai seem increasingly impossible); this part of the story has obviously been worked out well in advance. But Donaldson seems to have been less sure of what was supposed to happen in the second half, and for much of it relies on a blow-by-blow description of the protagonists' journey down the Soulsease River through Andelain - where they pause for another meeting with the Dead first encountered in The Wounded Land, who prove just as willfully (and as pointlessly) cryptic as before - into the caverns of Kiril Threndor, to the final confrontation with Lord Foul for which we've been waiting. And a most unsatisfactory confrontation it is too: Covenant gives him his ring, dies, becomes one with the mountain, and allows Foul to exhaust himself against him with blast after blast of wild magic. Quite literally, Foul gutters and goes out like a spent candle.

I don't believe it, and I have a feeling that Donaldson doesn't think we've seen the last of him either. Considering the incredible power and resources he's given the forces of evil (so incredible that you wonder how they could ever be defeated anyway), it seems absurd that such a being could be done away with in so simple a fashion. Admittedly, there's a lot of doubletalk (as there has been in both the previous volumes) about ends, means, and inadvertently serving what you claim to be opposing in an attempt to make it seem more complex than it is, but this does not so much deepen the issue as fudge it; and fudging, you'll recall, was what we got at the end of The Power That Preserves...

In my above-mentioned review of The One Tree, I concluded by expressing the hope that Donaldson would end this second trilogy in such a way as to render impossible any further chronicles of Thomas Covenant. Covenant may be dead, but I think that hope is a forlorn one - yet for our sake and his I also hope that he resists the temptation. His ideas were worthwhile, once upon a time, but he has now said everything and more than there is to say about them, and should move on to something new before he ruins them altogether and stereotypes himself into the bargain.

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"PLOTS... ARE NECESSARY THINGS"

HELEN MCNABB

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[DOWNBELOW STATION by C.J. CHERRYH. Methuen 1983, 432pp., £1.95 ISBN 0-413-] [51310-6]

C.J.Cherryh writes space adventure stories which are a type of book not in the forefront of current fashion. Space adventure is known for brawny, mono-syllabic heroes with hairy chests, winsome, dim and decorative heroines, and of course, the Baddies, often alien and always awful. However in Cherryh's hands the space adventure can become considerably more than verbal babyfood (bland, smooth and guaranteed not to upset). Her work is uneven, but the best of it has seen the creation of some of the best aliens in genuinely non-human settings that I've read. Downbelow Station is a space adventure story which is quite enough for many people to condemn it unread and indeed, if your taste is for inner space, allusive Ballard type stories then this is not the book for you. However the title of this review was chosen advisedly, because this is one of the best plotted books I've read in years and that includes detective stories.

Chapter 1 covers the years 2006-2352 in seven pages, setting the historical scene. The growth of the space stations leads to the all powerful Earth Company and their fleet of military ships led by Marzian (hence the fleet's nickname - the Mazianni), the independant Merchant fleet who trade with Earth and her stations as well as the Earth breakaway group, the Union. The Union is expanding while Earth's interests are contracting. The scene is set with the Mazianni fighting a rearguard action against the Union forces, an action which is going to centre upon the space station orbiting the world of Pell, the Downbelow Station of the title.

Except that it's not that simple, Cherryh makes her readers work for their story. With Chapter 2 the myriad threads of the plot begin independently with Signy Mallory, Captain of the Norway on her ship, shifting to Damon Konstantin on Pell Station, both of whom, along with all the other characters, are in the midst of an enormous crisis whose import is unclear both to them and to us. Nor are we told why Norway and other ships are arriving with hordes of refugees, Mallory knows but she's not telling us any more than she's telling the people on Pell station. As the layers of the story inter-

connect the clear distinctions as to who are the goodies and who are the baddies become blurred, the nice neat line up we were given at the beginning is seen to be erroneous.

People aren't quite what we thought them, the goodies aren't so good and the baddies aren't so bad, until by the end of the book the line up has altered radically, more than we though possible at the beginning.

Cherry has been skillful in creating the world where the novel takes place. I have no difficulty believing that the world could be as she portrays it and that people can and do behave as her characters do. The characterisation is largely successful, without being in the least heavy handed. We are shown a lot about the main characters and we follow them through the crisis, learning as they learn, watching them grow and develop. We don't see a one sided picture but instead multi-faceted views of the crisis on Downbelow station as the various characters discover they must interrelate with people who they once considered their enemies and distrust those whom they once considered friends. The Downers, the alien inhabitants of Pell, are an example of the breath of the story because it could have been written without them, but the Downers add richness, an extra dimension. Cherry is good at aliens although the Downers are by no means the most strange or the best realised of them, they are alien, their motivations and behaviour are not human and they remain fundamentally unaffected by the crisis which alters the humans around them. But the thought that has gone into their creation is symptomatic of the thought that has gone into the novel.

The style is economical and functional with no passages of elegant description or beautiful prose, the words used are those which best tell the story without fuss or distraction. There are diabolical diagrams of the station and a space ship which are more confusing than helpful, if they had to be added decent drawings should have been done rather than tacky sketches. The tone is brisk, without being hurried, the progress of the story being its main aim and purpose, aims which it achieves effectively. Downbelow Station won the 1982 Hugo Award against, among others, The Claw of the Conciliator by Gene Wolfe which points up the problems inherent in any award. Both books are good, but they're different. It's like comparing strawberries and cream with a good steak. It's meaningless and not at all helpful. This is not a book for everyone. It is very much an adventure story although a sophisticated one. The plotting is excellent, the characterisation effective and the style efficient. It will not appeal to those who dislike space adventure because the premise is meaningless to them, having said that I enjoyed it enormously, read it until late in the night and would recommend it to anyone who likes a good story which is not an easy read. That may sound contradictory but Cherryh does insist that the reader thinks, if you want something brainless then this isn't for you, it may be space adventure but it's not predigested pap, you have to read and inwardly digest it yourself.



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