

# VECTOR

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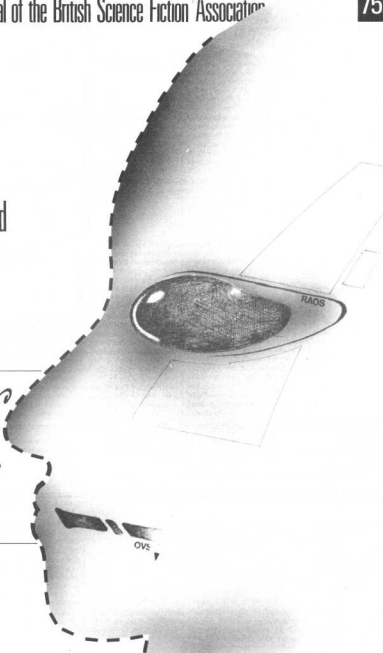
The critical journal of the British Science Fiction Association

75P

Albion Writ ~ Dave Langford  
Geoff Ryman interviewed  
Book reviews and Letters

## *The Face of the Robots*

L.J. Hurst on Asimov



OCTOBER/NOVEMBER 1985

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# EDITORIAL

DAVID V. BARRETT

"We hold these truths to be sacred and undeniable..."

"Thou shalt not kill.  
Thou shalt not commit adultery.  
Thou shalt not steal..."

Few disagree with these consensus beliefs, by which our lives and attitudes are consciously or unconsciously directed, but it does not take a doctorate in moral theology to establish their naivety. They are generalizations of areas of thought or behaviour which, while useful as such, cannot be regarded as universally applicable, as laws of the Universe, or of God, or the gods; for to argue from the general to the particular (inductive reasoning) is as prone to distortion of logic, common sense and reality as to argue from the particular to the general (deductive reasoning). Having said that, and having accepted that there are exceptions to every rule, we may still safely assume that the general consensus is that: "Thou shalt not kill, etc."

But - to paraphrase Animal Farm - some basic truths are basically more true than others. Consensus beliefs are subject to change.

It would be unthinkable now to hang a man for stealing a sheep, to send a seven year old child up a chimney, to call a woman a slut because her ankles are visible. But tell a respectable businessman of a hundred years ago that he is not allowed to refuse to employ a man because he is black, or that his daughter plans to live with a man without marrying him, or that a woman has entered church without a hat. Unthinkable! These aren't just changes in law, or in fashion. They are changes in deeply-held consensus beliefs.

It can be disturbing to live through such changes. Two examples:

1. A few years ago smoking was socially acceptable. If you didn't like it, tough! It was up to you to move away from it. But in my last office the five non-smokers exercised their democratic right and forbade me to smoke. That I could - just - accept. What I could not accept was their attitude towards me. I was disgusting. They were in the right; I was in the wrong. I was the offender. I was the pariah. I became an oppressed minority. And society, which (in all other respects) is sworn to protect minorities, lends its full support to the vilification I suffered. What has happened? The consensus belief has changed, that's all.

"There seems to be a deep change in the way men now look at the world, as if one truth should drive out another - as if whatever is not their truth must be falsehood."  
Marion Bradley, *The Nixes of Avalon*

2. Jay Honeyford, Headmaster of Drummond Middle School, Bradford, was pilloried and subjected to abuse because he dared to disagree with the consensus beliefs about multi-racial educational methods. Put simply, he wanted a high standard of education for all his pupils - the white minority as well as the non-white majority. This was judged racist.

Consensus beliefs are even stronger when they are shared by a relatively small



group, an elite. Try holding a discussion on comparative religion with a fervent evangelical Christian; or suggest to the youth selling 'Militant' that though there might be something in what he says, has he considered the policies of X,Y,Z party on whatever political topic. Immediately you are marked down as the Enemy, the Evil One. You're happy to discuss all sides of a question; they will not accept the validity of any viewpoint other than their own. Voltaire may have said, 'I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it'; they will deny you even that right.

This is where a deeply-held consensus belief becomes intolerance, arrogance, and a danger to freedom of speech or thought. In short, totalitarianism.

Martin seemed to receive his ideas as if they were personal attacks instead of considered differences of opinion.

- Paul Fressa, *Broken Symmetries*

Overturning current consensus beliefs has long been done in SF, but too often clumsily or didactically. Heinlein's *Farnham's Freehold* reverses Western racial prejudice; Edmund Cooper's *Who Needs Men?* reverses sexual stereotypes. Both are unsuccessful; they come over as contrived and insincere. You can't just swap things around and say, 'Wow, that's really revolutionary SF'.

Consensus beliefs are the power behind convention; they stem from, reinforce, and create convention. But fighting convention itself seldom works. Kids rebel against society's norms in clothes and hair - and end up wearing the uniform of the Mods or the Rockers, the Hippies, the Greasers, the Skinheads or the Punks. They replace one convention with another.

And there are conventions in SF writing. Take politics as an example; it is as rigid as fantasy should be set in a feudal world, and that the far future should be either libertarian or authoritarian. But a political system is a socio-economic system, which means it affects society, which is composed of people, who are individuals. The author has changed the system, but has he changed the consensus beliefs, the deepest convictions, the givens of his characters? Or are they just late 20th Century Western middle-class people - or worse, 19th century cowboys or 17th century buccaners - in a different milieu?

Conventions and consensus beliefs change; so do acceptable styles in SF writing. 'The Golden Age' - hard science, spaceships and blasters. 'The New Wave' - heavily influenced by and spurred on by Moorcock, and helping to form such differently brilliant writers as Simak, Delany and Ballard. But Moorcock had also been responsible for reinforcing a convention - *Sword & Sorcery* - which pervades the lower derivative end of fantasy even today. The convention of the higher derivative end, of course, is Tolkien, as we are constantly reminded in the blurbs.

New Wave became a convention like any other, but it had the raw sophistication and energy of the Sixties, and it ought to have continued to be a major influence on SF writing. Some of the blame for its early strangulation might be laid on Chris Foss and his imitators: their cover art may have sold millions of SF paperbacks in the Seventies, but it set the development of the genre back by decades; cleverly designed book covers were back. Perhaps not in the authors' minds, but certainly in the minds of people who don't read SF - I'm not into battles in space - and, far more seriously, in the minds of publishers.

Technological SF is a legitimate part of the genre, just as S&M is a legitimate part of fantasy. But not 100%. Where is the publisher with the guts to ban the clunky spaceship and the swashbuckling hero/ine from his covers? Covers plant impressions in the minds of both non-readers and readers of SF; an image is created, and then authors are told, 'It's not saying it's not good, but it's not really SF, is it? It won't sell, you know.' It doesn't have to have rayguns and spaceships; we're back in the Forties and Fifties again.

In the last twelve months I've read just three new books that were original, that bucked the system and won through in print. Rob Holdstock's *Mythago Wood*, Chris Priest's *The Glamour*, and Mark Helprin's *Winter's Tale* were SF with guts, whatever they were marketed as. Their authors each had an idea that was not just good, it was alive. Then they ignored the conventions, the consensus beliefs, the straitjacket that SF has become trapped in, and wrote three of the most outstanding books of the last few years, in any fictional genre.

But these are the exceptions. Full-time authors have to make a living from their writing, and if the publishers won't accept their work, or if they manage to convince the authors that the public won't buy it, what can the authors do?

Or maybe the publishers are right. Maybe their presumed consensus belief of SF is correct. Maybe the only valid and viable SF is Sci-Fi. But that thought is too depressing, and I, for one, have never been one to conform.

## LETTERS

Dangerous  
divisions

We're still getting response to Vector 126, but so far only a trickle of letters about Vector 127. The more quickly you write, the more topical this column will be; until I get a permanent address, please continue to write via Paul's address.

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I PARTICULARLY ENJOYED THE INTERVIEW WITH JOE HALDEMAN (Vector 126); the interviewers came over as respectful but not sycophantic (a problem with a considerable number of interviews).

Liz Sourbut makes some interesting points and I agree with the main thrust of the article. Of course we must be critical, but in some cases it seems current SF can do no right. If you look through the last year's issues of *Vector*, *Matrix* and *PI* some reviewers/critics/commentators seem to take pleasure in stating that they no longer read SF, in which case I find it difficult to understand why they continue in the BSFA. A classic example of this masochistic breast-beating came in the interview with M. John Harrison in Vector 122, culminating with his statement that he was no longer going to write SF.

Times change, styles change, readership preference changes -

thank God. Many reviewers have their roots in the last period at best and often several periods ago; this colours one's views. Thus it takes concerted effort to understand the new period; many fail to do so.

TOM A. JONES  
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THIS WEEK I SEE THAT THE FILM *DEATH VALLEY*, SHOWN ON TV RECENTLY, is being blamed for a knife attack on a man in his doorway by a complete stranger just a few hours after. I also read that there is outcry over a planned episode of *Grange Hill* in which a pupil becomes a heroin addict. It is alleged that this will encourage more children to use drugs.

In Vector 126 Liz Sourbut suggests that the Americans would never have walked on the moon if it were not for the writings of pulp SF in the 40s.

Can this really be true? Does society reflect literature and television? Or is it the other way round?

I watched the film *Death Valley*. It didn't tempt me into killing anybody. I don't think that this film would have that effect on anyone who was not already this way inclined. As for *Grange Hill*, if the programme is accurate about heroin addiction then I doubt if it will encourage but rather, discourage people from drugs.

Perhaps SF pushed America to the moon, but if so why has it not pushed us further? Were are the orbiting space stations? Why have there been no missions to Mars? It is nearly 20 years since the Lunar programme began but we have no Lunar bases (unless they're just not telling us).

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I AM NOT SURE THAT THE PAGES OF VECTOR ARE THE CORRECT PLACE for theological discussion, but... Mary Gentle (V127) suggested that the resurrection was added to the Jesus 'myth' late in the day. Martyn Taylor (V127) quotes similarities in the gospels' accounts of Jesus' sayings about his future resurrection to attempt to refute this assertion. Now, the gospels were written approximately 30-50 years after the events they purport to describe. It seems to me unwise to use such sources to try to prove things one way or the other. It all depends on what is meant by 'late in the day.' Thirty years gives plenty of time for accretions and embellishments to the original events or sayings to have become accepted as actually having happened or been said. (I got the impression that Mary meant even later than this, though.)

Martyn further states that without the Resurrection there is no Christianity; Mary that the dying God myth isn't specifically Christian. I can see that, at the time of the early Christians, a supernatural element in a religion was a necessary condition for its promulgation and growth. (It may even have been necessary to invent it.) This is precisely what Mary was getting at. However, and I don't want to be wilfully misunderstood on this as I'm not necessarily stating my personal position, belief in the Resurrection is not actually necessary for Christian belief at all. All that is required is a belief that Christ died to redeem sinners. A sufficiently good man, not a God, would be enough for this.

I don't know what happened on the 'first' Easter because I wasn't there. Neither was Martyn, nor Mary. The only descriptions (divinely inspired or not) we have of these events were written by men and are, therefore, fallible. The reasons for which they were written are also now unfathomable. The writings are as much open to exegesis and interpretation as any others.

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Continued on page 18...

## A S I M O V

## The Face of the Robots

BY  
L. J. Hurst

MY NAME IN SCIENCE FICTION IS MOST OFTEN ASSOCIATED WITH robots," Asimov wrote in *Opus 100*. The basis of this was a number of short stories written between 1939 and 1957, and two novels published in 1954 and 1957 respectively. Since Asimov abandoned consistent SF writing in 1957, it is possible to say that robots concerned him throughout his active SF career. Even though he did not write two or three other short stories and has recently published a novel *The Robots of Dawn*, (reviewed in *Vector 122*) the production date of the best known of those late short stories (*The Bicentennial Man* in 1977) and the marketing of the novel seem good reasons not to include them in this reconsideration. Asimov's robots are the robots that he wrote of between 1939 and 1957.

Although they are sometimes treated as identical there are actually three types, or worlds, of story. The best known is that of *I, Robot* and some of *The Rest of the Robots* - the world of US Robots and Mechanical Men, Susan Calvin and Donovan and Powell, describing events between 1998 and 2057; the second is found in the rest of the stories in *Rest of the Robots* and one other story, which are varied in date and location; and the third is the universe (Earth and Outer Planets) of the two novels set in about 5000 AD, *The Caves on Steel* and *The Naked Sun*. There are major differences between the treatment of these three types.

Writing in 1958, Asimov said "It was not until 1939 that, for the first time as far as I know, a science fiction writer (Asimov means himself) approached the robots from a consistent engineering standpoint...To me, the applied science of manufacturing robots, of designing them, of studying them was 'robotics'" (*Opus p75*). With Asimov's declared aim to end the Frankenstein theme of creations capable of turning on their creator, the stories raise a number of questions about his approach and his success: I think we should check that the robots are logical, decent, useful and of human benefit. The robots do not have to be aware of this, but we should be: the robots may be showing us the way that automation should or should not go, or else Asimov did not examine well the problem of automation (robotisation).

In the short stories of the immediate future (the US Robot stories) we see the manufacture and use of robots, but not their invention, which is passed over in *I, Robot* in a couple of lines. The stories concentrate on the experience of Susan Calvin, roboticspsychologist, and Donovan and Powell, a team of installation engineers. They work for US Robot and Mechanical Men Inc. because the company makes all positronic robots and only leases them out. The company has enormous power, as do its agents, partly because of the cost of the robots, but in turn employees' lives are curtailed by the company, internal politics and fear of repercussions. Several stories revolve around employees having to perform acts that are illegal or socially undesirable or both.

In this period, robotophobia (both against robots as machines and against automation causing unemployment) has led to most of the robots being kept off Earth, and the need for the Three Laws. Although Asimov has explained how he developed the laws through several stories, he has never written a story about their origin (they do not seem to have been planned by US Robots, to whose interests they run counter). And given the alleged power of US Robots it looks doubtful that they would have been adopted. US Robots seems to have been inspired by IBM. But when the robot stories began to appear IBM was not a computer company: it was producing mainly office machinery and tabulating machinery. As IBM became a computer giant Asimov's stories did not change, even though he regards computers and robots as identical. So they should obey the same logic and be as consistent. At the same

time, the life style of the early robot period is the same as ours, or was the same as ours, with all its social problems and all the problems of work invading social life.

Three thousand years later, in the two novels, space exploration has occupied the planets but Earth is overpopulated, causing the inhabitants to live in huge cellular Cities. Robotophobia is still endemic, partly because of the unemployment problem. The situation is as it was when Susan Calvin said: "The labor unions, of course, naturally opposed robot competition for human jobs." However, both US Robots and trade unions seem to have disappeared. While the separately developing Spacers have eugenic, Earth has none. The three thousand years have allowed certain social patterns to become inherent: everyone is now agoraphobic on Earth, so that leaving the Cities is impossible. Sexual discrimination has continued on Earth, so that Jessie Bailey has to take her husband's grade, and give up her own job just like Claire Belmont three millennia before; and on the planet Solaria, too, a Spacer wife has to move in with her husband, horrible as his presence is to her. Generally, life is unpleasant, although Elijah Bailey, the novels' hero, seems to be happy in the City, in his graded cell-inhabiting life.

With this background it is worth looking at the logic of the robot fiction, both in the explicit logic, how the robots work, and in the implicit logic, the consistency or inconsistency of the fiction.

The general impression of the novels is of an unexplained social regression. Three thousand years' development has not occurred. For instance, while 'Satisfaction Guarantee' has Tony, a human simulacrum, on Earth before 2058, the appearance of humanoid Daniel Olivav is treated as a marvel in the two novels. And the development of Tony with the Three Laws is contradicted by 'Let's Get Together', where simulacra are built without them. The development of robots on Solaria and the Outer Planets has proceeded at a faster rate than on Earth, but even there development has not proceeded at a fast rate. The plot of *The Naked Sun* revolves around robot-piloted spacecraft as potential vehicles, yet how humans could have crossed space and hyperspace without them is not mentioned (even though they were being tested in 'Risk' and 'Escape' before Susan Calvin's death).

In the novels of Asimov's 'robot world', the question of control also deserves consideration. Robots have the complex Three Laws built in but they lack far simpler checks and controls. They seem to lack simple validity checks on their data input, they do not have ways of storing information, nor do they link information. Several stories revolve around robots damaged because they are allowed to accept and proceed with faulty or damaged information. In making robots work, Asimov has 'Escape'. A simple programming check (for instance, a typical computer check would be that a day of the month must be a number between one and thirty-one) is missed completely. Similarly robots forget easily: "Do you know who told you?" "I do not, master. It is in my memory store." (*The Naked Sun*, p134) seems odd. Is the word 'not' missing?

Lastly, on a higher level, robots cannot recognise patterns, eg the patterns of Bailey's social life or of his speech. Several stories revolve around problems of language, where figurative statements are misunderstood repeatedly as literal, as Joseph Patrouch has pointed out about 'Little Lost Robot'. Here, 'Get lost' is understood to mean 'Don't let yourself be found' instead of 'Go away', yet knowing these problems, major commands are given to robots in ordinary speech (eg 'Risk') without attempt at fixing meanings by using a programming language or a dictionary or pre-agreed meanings. The general impression is that robots are built well but are badly programmed, indeed seem never to be reprogrammed or corrected at all. As Joseph Patrouch points out: when Lenny the baby is not programmed to be like an adult, that does not mean he is programmed to be a baby. In a robot both states should be the result of programming. To suggest otherwise is wrong.

Asimov's imagery and the language of his characters further complicate his worlds. Earth humans address robots as 'boy' and when a poor woman might be served by a robot shop assistant (clerk) she is shocked - "Why can't I have a decent clerk? Ain't I respectable?" The position of the robots is treated as being like that of Asimov's contemporary Negroes. The attitudes encountered and the language used imply that robotophobia is an irrational race hatred. But this is reinforced by the robot design - the makers 'build good, healthy alive complexes into the damned machines.' says Powell when a robot replies 'Yes, Master' to his question ('Runaround'). Three thousand years later the Solarian robot nurse still says 'master'. Only the capital letter has disappeared. The Spacers and their robots talk of a C/fe culture - 'biological' and 'cultural' - but the 'cultural' is not.

Furthermore, the Cities several times are given references that refer back to earlier crowded, teeming living areas. The east European ghettos and the Yellow Peril are recalled in indirect references. The Cities are 'the acme of efficiency', but the lives lived and the descriptions of it hardly echo that.

Before the physical perfection of the Spacers Earth is nothing, its inhabitants little more than a necessary evil of declining importance to the Space trade.

The fall in living standards can be seen, as population constraint means strict Earth grading and rationing. No-one ever seems to question this grade, which can be raised as promotion, or lowered. Reduction has two causes - one is punishment (Baley's father lost all grade because he was responsible for a nuclear disaster), the other is loss of one's job - usually due to automation.

Grade provides benefits in peculiar ways: 'Baley' didn't put his rating ticket in his hand till they passed the last of the Hudson sections. A C-5 had no seat rights east of Hudson's. Baley uses his privilege to show how his world works, but do people still have to wear hats after living indoors for three thousand years to do it?

Whatever is governing Earth has no concept of full employment. Robots replace humans with little consideration of the costs or of the lost good will. Unless the capital costs of robot building have fallen since Susan Calvin's death (something not mentioned), it would be worse comparing the cost of a robot against a human shop assistant, who has to be housed anyway, and is fed on yeast mush. But this never seems to be done. In fact, apart from Daniel Olivaw, who is not doing the job he was designed for, we never see a robot working normally (with one exception - see below).

Robots replace humans in another way, too. The novels need to be set three thousand years ahead to allow a reasonable period for human conditioning to change. Both novels revolve around a human response totally unimaginable today. In *The Caves of Steel* it is aporophobia, which luckily allows Baley to ignore the 500-City exits, while in *The Naked Sun* it is fear of human contact (which must have developed over a far shorter period). Both of these changes are pre-conditions of the plot - Baley could not investigate or solve his cases without them. To this extent the humans are programmed because they have ceased to know the human free will of travel or communion with their neighbours. It is the robots, either because of poor commands or some fluke, that are inconsistent. Story after story revolves around this irregularity - the robots provide the interest because the humans cannot. Neither Susan Calvin nor Elijah Baley can be described as a hero. The superbly developed Solarians are almost inhuman in their isolation.

Quite contrary to this spirit of robotisation, though, is the treatment of robots as individuals (like Lennie, Daniel Olivaw, or much later, Andrew, the Bicentennial Man). At the end of 'Ular', Calvin has driven Herbie, the mind-reading robot, insane. Patrouch says: 'One's attitude toward Asimov's robots will probably determine to a large extent what one thinks about this. If you consider them as complicated machines (as Asimov does), then her reaction was no worse than unplugging a coffee pot. But if you consider them artificial people (Asimov tells us that they are conscious, remember), then she has willfully driven another character insane to protect her vanity'. So some stories revolve around the importance of protecting the robots, such as 'Bonarround', while in others they are expendable. Susan Calvin treats Lennie as a human child, and in her association with the (robot) political leader, Stephen Hyerley, treats him as a human adult: how can a C/Pe culture develop when one half of it can be switched off?

Robots and computers are the only probable way we know of to access non-human (artificial) intelligence. But Asimov seems to provide no non-human alternatives: the actions and attitudes of his robots are based on clear stereotypes in human existence. When he wrote 'Season' - about a robot arriving at religious belief - he simply used Islam as his model, rather than create any new supernaturalism. The robots are synthetic, not organic, but hardly break any barriers about difference or equality. In creating the robots he failed to define a non-human alternative.

The other main strand to discussion of the treatment of logic in the stories, apart from the physical world, is the consistency of the stories. In a speech to the SFPA in 1967, Asimov said: 'There are disadvantages to a series of stories. There is, for one thing, the bugaboo of self-consistency. It is annoying to be hampered, in working out a story, by the fact that some perfectly logical development is ruled out since, three stories before, you had to make such a development impossible because of the needs of the plot of that story' (Opus p255 - Asimov is talking about the Foundation series). It reveals a lack of planning and, perhaps a lack of purpose. With no premeditation he never seems to realize the inappropriateness of his contents (like Baley's hat). But generally speaking, to be inconsistent is to be illogical. Asimov hinders an interest in robotisation or the problems of Artificial Intelligence because of this lack of consistency. Despite the Three Laws hindering robot behaviour most of the short stories revolve around robots breaking them, as several critics have noticed, and both of the novels use robots as agents of murder. But irreconcilable differences also occur on a much larger scale.

As noted before, 'Let's Get Together', a Cold War story, involves human simulation robots but it without the Three Laws; yet everywhere else the Laws are pre-eminent, and positronic brains are supposedly unmakeable without them. The story also contradicts the political developments in 'Evidence' and 'The Inevitable Conflict', which involve world federation in 2044, as it is set about 2050. By the time of the novels the venomous Jovians of 'Victory Unintentional' have disappeared, but so had an attempt to link the novels. Both were written for Gold's Galaxy and a major publisher, not for the ephemerality of the pulps, yet even in them planning and consistency are lacking. *The Caves of Steel* ends with Commissioner Underby being turned into a double (or triple) agent, working to turn the Medievalists of Earth into a force for emigration, relieving Earth of population pressures, and identifying the home world with the Outer Worlds. Yet when *The Naked Sun* begins, this emigration is not mentioned, nor does it appear to have begun although it would have to be a major political issue. The resolution of one novel is treated as though it had not happened in the next.

Perhaps it is now understandable why I find one story far more satisfactory than all the others. It is the only one where robots work normally, the only story in which humans do not appear, the only one that does not involve the Three Laws. It is 'Victory Unintentional', Asimov's sixth robot story, written at a time when 'the robots are still not taken quite seriously' by their author. Robots identifying with their masters so much that the Jovians do not realise 22 One, Two and Three are not the humans they previously contacted, yet individuals, they also show signs that Asimov was questioning his parasitic Three Laws. "I am not surprised now", burst out 22 One, "that we were specifically instructed to disregard Jovian orders" - implies that Asimov was thinking of the Second Law as being 'A robot must obey the orders given it except where such orders would conflict with the First Law' (omitting that these orders must be given 'by human beings'). And the robots are also treated as peaceful - "We're only robots. We're not the ones they (the Jovians) have to fight" - implies that robots cannot fight or supply solidarity. Of course, this runs contrary to Baley's conclusion in *The Naked Sun* and also to Susan Calvin's synopsis of the situation - 'There was a time when humanity faced the universe alone and without a friend. Now he has creatures to help him, stronger creatures than himself, more faithful, more useful, and absolutely devoted to him'. And the solution to the story turns in a most indirect way on victory without the robots being aware of using any of Calvin's attributes.

'Victory Unintentional' is often taken without limitations on the description of the robots: they are supermachines. In the world of Susan Calvin and Elijah Baley it is the limitations and meanness of their lives and environment that comes between the reader and robophilia. The robots may be nothing to fear, but the conditions in which they are used certainly are. It may be better not to have robots and not to have to work for US Robots or in the city yeast vats, than to have thinking, devoted slaves who make us unemployed. If the robots come as Asimov extrapolates, the good times will have gone for good.

The world of the robots is one to which they have contributed rather than made totally, but it is a dreadful place. Robotisation has helped move it towards the cramped overpopulated Earth Cities, and the soulless isolating Outer Worlds. The technical development of Asimov robots leads finally to a dead end: without them we are limited, with them we are limited as well. The people who develop them are unattractive, the people who have to work with them are unattractive as well, and the poor programming they receive means that it is difficult to show their success.

Asimov wrote his robot stories to attack the Frankenstein theme; perhaps his creations never came to life.

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# 'O HAPPY DAYS'

An interview with Geoff Ryman, by Paul Kincaid

5

IT HAS BEEN A GOOD YEAR OR SO FOR GEOFF RYMAN. IN MAY 1984, AT Tynescon II the Mexican, his dramatisation of Philip K. Dick's *The Transmigration of Timothy Archer* was premiered to considerable acclaim (and Geoff himself won special praise for his own performance). Around the same time, in Issue 7 of *Interzone* his incredible novella *The Unconquered Country* was published. The response to this was similarly fervid, resulting in a very clear victory in the BSFA Awards for best short fiction. *The Unconquered Country* would have been a clear favourite for inclusion in the first *Interzone* Anthology but for two things, its length and the fact that it is already scheduled to appear as an illustrated book. So instead Geoff received the singular honour of being invited to write a fresh story for the anthology. The result was *O Happy Day*, which I am not alone in considering the best thing in the anthology, indeed I consider it better than *The Unconquered Country*.

Now to complete the year his first novel, *The Warrior Who Carried Life* has just been published by Allen and Unwin. Mike Dickinson reviewed the novel in *Vector* 127 and on the evidence so far I would tip it as a strong contender for next Easter's BSFA Award. An eventful year by an standards.

When we met recently, however, I began by asking him about his first published story, *The Diary of the Translator* which appeared in Hilary Bailey's *New Worlds* Ten in 1976.

"It came very very suddenly, on a train going to a party; I got this terrific idea for a story. It was one of those things where you more or less start writing it in your head, and I had to sit there on the train, go to the party, be polite, come back on the train, keeping the story going until I got home to write it. As usual the first draft took no time at all, then after that I spent a lot of time revising it."

It was a very assured story, so I was surprised when he said that it was the first short story he had written.

"I'd been goofing around writing, but it was the first short story I'd ever written. Unfortunately I'd read Tolkien and *The Once and Future King*, and I thought that if you're a writer what you did was spurge all all over the place. So I kept trying to write these great big huge enormous things.

It was the idea of 'short stories' that inspired me: one little scene after another, five little scenes. It was a very indulgent story; I didn't have any commercial discipline at all. I think it was well written in a way though I wouldn't write it like that now; I think it was very pretentious in bits. I was

very lucky that there was still a scrap of *New Worlds* left over to take it. I mean, there was a window there and it just slipped in before the window closed." Lucky or not, pretentious and undisciplined or not, a story of the quality of *'Diary'* would normally have presaged a steady climb to eminence. Perhaps it was the closure of the *New Worlds* window that stopped this happening in Geoff's case.

He next wrote a story called *'Fall of Angels'*, which was my first introduction to him. He took it to a writers' course at Helden Bridge where we met in 1977, along with Alan Dorey, Mike Dickinson, Graham James and Simon Ounsley - a formidable line-up. *'Fall of Angels'* took the course by storm, it was original and inventive in a way that has become something of a Ryman hallmark. I know people who still consider that story the best thing he has written, but it never sold, a fact that to me seems to reflect more on the conservatism of editors than on the quality of the work.

Over the next year years he sold a handful of stories to *Ad Astra* and *Men Only*, some of which he still considers "kinda good", but which made little impact.

"Then I got bogged down in this huge story - I was half way through at the 100,000 word mark. I gave it to Randall Flynn, who read it and said it was terrible, and I gave it to a couple of other people who more or less said the same.

So I said 'Sod it!', and thought: if I was a publisher, what would I want to be publishing? And I drew up an outline, and it started turning into a novel. It was a very simple thing, I'd forgotten you're not being subtle if you give your characters obscure, outre, psychological motivations; because they can have these motivations and yearn to do something and still sit there because of inertia. What I found out was, if you give your character a whopping great objective correlative, he or she has got to react. And suddenly, I think it was '81, I sat down and wrote an outline for *The Warrior Who Carried Life* in the middle of work. Got very excited, went home and wrote the first draft and wrote the second and wrote the third, and that took a year. I finished at one of the seasons, I think it was the second, and then as is always the case it seemed to take forever to sell."

After what he describes as "a long quiet period", he next started on *The Unconquered Country*, still drawing inspiration from the writing of *Warrior*. He wrote and rewrote and rewrote the story until it finally ground to a halt at around 18,000 words. Too long for any magazine outlet, but too short for a

# R Y M A N

novel. So he left it, until it fell into the hands of Mike Dickinson and Tom Shippey, who both liked it and urged him to do something with it. He'd already sounded out Interscope about the possibility of publishing something of this length and they said 'No!'. "To be fair they actually said: 'If it's as good as J.G. Ballard, we might.' And I said, 'Thanks!'. But, under Dickinson's and Shippey's urging, Geoff decided to try Interscope again.

"I thought I'd make it easy on the guys. I made about six xerox copies and sent it to all the collective. I thought at least it won't have to circulate among them all, at least they'll all have a chance to read it. Which I think was sensible because it's a whopping great thing to ask them to even attempt to look at. And they said: 'Yes, but it's too long.' I said: 'I know it's too long.' They said: 'We can't get it in the magazine.' I said 'I know that.' They said 'You're going to have to cut it.' I said: 'I'm not sure I can.' And they said: 'Okay, Roz (Kaveney) and John Clute are on their way with a pair of scissors.'

Between then they managed to cut the story down by about 2,000 to 3,000 words, and the story was, of course, published very successfully. This brought me onto one aspect of his work that bothers me a little: it is very violent.

"Yeah, it worries me very much, because I don't think I'm a violent person."

So I suggested, was he trying to make a point against violence by using extreme violence to make the point?

"No I don't think I am. I think I'm trying to write about anger. And I think in the conditions, certainly of *Warrior*, you're writing about a very harsh society and so I think there's something very objective about the violence there.

Cara, when she starts out, has some bad things about her that I don't like. I'm very moved by her love of her family, I'm not very moved by her social snobbery, and I'm not very moved by her sense of self. What I was doing was fiddling with the fine controls so that suddenly you had a flip-flop, and you modulated from something that was very violent to something that was very peaceful.

I don't really deal with structuralism or before that with Freudianism or any of that stuff. First off I don't understand it so I'd be a fool to try it. But I think, post the fact when you're dealing with a fantasy novel you are getting back to something which is archetypal. And I think an awful lot of archetypal events feel violent, even if they aren't.

It actually does bother me, the violence in the book, I don't know where it comes from. It's as if the characters feel things very strongly and they're in an environment where they can use violence. Third, in *Unconquered Country*, don't and doesn't and isn't interested in it. She's surrounded by it, it's interpenetrated all around her. But she is trying to find a way out, and in a sense could be said to find it, but only in a sense.

Yes, I'm appalled by violence, and very frightened of it. We live in a century in which appalling things continually happen, and it's as if we can't get beyond that point. I think I have to deal with that element in what I see going on before I can get around to other things. I hope that's where it is. I'm trying to program my subconscious to come up with something delicate and light and non-Sartrean."

That's as may be, though the thing may go deeper than he thinks. I reminded Geoff of a very similar episode of violence in his first story *Diary of the Translator*. At one point the "frisks" conjured up a replica of a vagina and were grinding out cigarettes in it" (*New Worlds* Ten, p150).

"Did I really have that with...Jesus, I'd forgotten that. See, I only remember the nice bits. I only remember Nobby Dick at the end."

Violence quite naturally led us to the subject of sex. Though it's getting less uncommon, it is still unusual for male writers to create female central characters. Geoff, however, has come so in two of his most significant works, *The Warrior Who Carried Life* and *The Unconquered Country*.

"Yes, I've noticed that. I guess I just find women slightly more sympathetic in some ways. I always have."

But this is only one aspect of a far more significant feature of his work. In a review of the Interscope anthology I commented upon the sexual ambiguity of 'O Happy Day', where women organise and run the death camp. And something similar crops up in the novel in which Cara changes into a man for the duration of her adventures. It's an unusual perspective on women.

"Obviously being gay I'm sure has a big influence. The thing that always amazes me is the expression about gays: 'he doesn't like women'. Whereas in fact, if anyone knew anything about poores they'd know perfectly well that we like women a lot better than a lot of straight me do. And I think that's just part and parcel of the whole thing. I don't find men very sympathetic sometimes."

But he doesn't make the women especially sympathetic in *O Happy Day*.

"Well, no, it depends on which women. That was the whole point. It was funny, because the story sort of got overtaken by another story. There always was going to be central character who jollied people along. But it did become a thing about America as well, and what was good about America, and what was bad. So it was a surprise, that wasn't supposed to happen; though I'm very glad it did because it gave another layer.

But the whole point about it was that you had a whole way of thinking that creates a basis for action by creating analytical categories - for want of a better term you could call that 'history'. The thing that you've always got to remember is that in specific practice those categories don't apply, and don't even exist, so you couldn't talk about 'The Men' or 'The Women' or 'The Boys'. In practice the Grills who were running the camp were very nice people. In practice 1984 didn't happen because the people who manned the cameras got so bored that they liked the people that were watching better than the people who were in ruling them. And Royce, who'd been a prison guard, knew that, knew you could end up liking the prisoners better than the people you're guarding them for. So with the shrewdness of a really good person he worked on that. The Grills very obviously knew he was doing this, and forgave him simply because he was more interesting than anything else that was happening. So there's a sudden power shift."

The ideological villain, if there is one, is Big Lou. And Big Lou exists, he's absolutely and totally real.

It's a political story, and maybe I shouldn't say this or I'll get something nasty in the post. It wasn't written against feminism, of course. It wasn't written against socialist feminism, it wasn't written against radical feminism. It was written against something called revolutionary feminism, which I've heard a bit about through some women friends who've stormed out in disgust at some of the things it's contemplating - basically things along the line, it's real, it's out there, it exists. And my own feeling is, you've had perfectly good and liberating ideologies that have been ruined by mystification before, i.e. nationalism, which was supposed to be a way of splitting up empires, for goodness sake, and establishing the primacy of intangible values over money, over things you could count, intangible bonds of feeling and kinship. What happened was, it got mystified, much the same way that feminism's getting mystified with 'The Earth Mother' and all this sentimentality about mothers and daughters.

Anyway, in a sense it started out saying: if you're really contemplating this, this is what you're talking about. There was a rationale behind it. A lot of people, including a lot of science fiction writers across the water, have criticised it because it didn't hold water for them. I think it would hold more water for them if some sections - which I agree shouldn't really be in there because they weren't fiction, they were a sort of explanation of how it happened - were just left out."

There is in existence a screenplay version of the story





which might win the approval of such critics. More simply done, it eliminates the explanations and allows the hero to look back at what led up to it, showing his arrest, how he got on the train, and allowing the audience to hear him say the things that would get him into trouble.

Talking about this dramatization led us naturally to his stage version of *The Transmigration of Timothy Archer*, and I asked him why he'd done it.

"Oh, because I'd just read the book and I thought it was wonderful, that's why. I couldn't believe the tone of voice - just every sentence you could hear somebody saying it in a sort of flat, ironical, very funny, totally fed up, very heart-broken way. And I saw how it could be a play, and I thought: I bet no-one else knows it could be a play, and an incredibly dramatic one.

So I wrote in the margins, and found there was a lot of rewriting because you just couldn't have Angel talking to the audience. As soon as you begin to cut, it's so marvelously alive (as so much of Dick's writing is) you take one thing out and the connections don't work any more, the connections aren't there. Things become non-sequiturs. Wild, emotional leaps that really caught a feeling now were just stranded metaphors. It was very disappointing when I went back and read the first draft and realized I hadn't done it. I hadn't got it. So I cut it some more, and kept cutting it.

For months we didn't have a cast, it was just Kim and me. The only reason I went ahead was Kim Campbell said that she'd take it on - which was an incredibly brave thing to do, and quite a leap in the dark for her too, and a lot of work.

I decided to concentrate on the humour, because audiences always like to laugh in drama, then I'd concentrate on the key emotional moments. The biggest problem was, he was writing about a bore. You cannot have Tim do what he does on the page. But I was then left with a Tim who wasn't even positively boring. I'd cut out all of his dialogue, or most of it, so there was very little left for Tim to do, which meant that in the third act I had to do a lot more with him. So Tim changed, and that's one of the reasons the ending's different. It also changed, frankly, because you just cannot have a long, slow, gentle settle. You needed something dramatic, something that ended it well, and it had to be spicy and quick because the audience had been there for an hour and a half."

The more we talked about it, the more formidable the task seemed. So I asked him if he'd had any experience of writing drama before.

"I took two playwriting courses at UCLA, and produced stuff of an unimaginable degree. *Timothy Archer* was the first anywhere near drama I'd gone in 10 or 15 years. I just didn't think I was a dramatist.

Okay, any writer, you could write unless you've got an ear for dialogue. Rule Number One: describe. Rule Number two: dialogue. Rule Number Three: then you learn how to structure something. I knew I could do dialogue. In fact for a long time I could only do dialogue, I couldn't describe feeling at all. So I knew that sooner or later I might do some drama.

I remember when I was writing this long horrible novel that never got anywhere, the main character - I mean, I didn't like the main character - was always putting on plays. And I thought: well I don't like the character and I don't like the novel, but I sure as hell like some of the plays he was putting on. So maybe I was programming myself to write some plays."

When I asked if there was any more drama in the pipeline he revealed, surprisingly, that he was writing a movie screenplay for Julie Andrews. But he was having great problems with the first half, which is very boring. "See, I'm writing about everyday life. One shouldn't do it."

This tempted me to suggest that he didn't therefore, see himself as a great realist novelist. He was decisive.

"No. The things I like best about my work are the realistic elements, but it seems to need a fantasy kick-off somewhere along the line."

If he is going to stick to fantasy that will be literature's loss, but our gain. But as a fantasist he is incredibly profigate with his ideas. Those of us who remember 'Fall of Angels' recall in particular the casual way in which fresh and vivid images and ideas are strewn across the background. I think any of us at Hadden Bridge would have been only too happy to construct an entire novel about the sort of ideas that occupied no more than a sentence of Geoff's story. Readers of *The Unconquered Country* will probably have had a similar response, with the background peppered with such details as walking houses and women renting out their wombs to give birth to tools and weapons. When I pointed this out, he said:

"I've always liked the idea that if you're in a different world, everything should be different. That's why I'm a fantasist and not a writer of fantastic literature where everything's everyday, and then a single element comes in and disrupts it. I keep having ideas for stories like that, but they never get off the ground."

Was that, perhaps, why it took him so long to write stories, then?

"I don't know why. I wouldn't like to say that was it. Once I get the idea it's very quick with the first draft, then it's lots and lots of re-writing. I'm a great believer that you've got to embody your words, and words are terribly terribly important. There's an audible click when it all falls into place.

I always remember Malcolm Bradbury's *The History Man*. They printed all nine different drafts of the opening of his novel, and none of them are interesting except the one he used."

Bringing the story almost up to date, I now moved on to talk about his next book, which is to be illustrated version of *The Unconquered Country* due from Allen and Unwin later this year. The illustrations by Michael Gabriel which accompanied the story's original appearance in *Interzone* had been commissioned by Geoff in the first place, so I asked him about these.

"I now feel more kindly about those illustrations that I did when they first came. I'd seen the guy's previous work which is absolutely stunning. I didn't understand at the time that artists are like writers, they get seized by inspiration, have projects that they really love and are very good at because of it. I now look at the illustrations that were in *Interzone* and think they're not too bad, but at the time I didn't think they were very good and couldn't really disguise my disappointment. The *Interzone* people didn't bother to disguise it either. We couldn't get enthusiastic."

Which still leaves the question of who will illustrate the book version, and that is still open to doubt. "I think we've found this nice Ukrainian, but I don't know."

And there's also the question of the text. He has not restored the cuts made before its publication in *Interzone*, but the text is longer.

"There's another story about Third when she's a child in the village. And that, somehow, for some reason made it easier to talk about the courtship with the person Crow. I haven't changed too much else apart from that. I didn't turn it into a novel, though I almost tried to."

When I'd turned off the tape recorder at the end of the interview, Geoff suddenly started pumping me for any criticisms I might have of his work. It's not something I have come to expect from the authors I know, who tend to shiver and act distant at the very mention of the word criticism, even from friends. But it was in character for someone as painstaking as Geoff Ryman.

The only problem was - I couldn't think of any.

## ALBION WRIT

BY David Langford



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# F<sup>the</sup> I N A L

drips

David Langford's second novel, *The Leaky Establishment*, is published in paperback by Sphere on 24th October. As a taster, here is the text of his Goll speech at Novacon 14 in Birmingham last November.

I FEEL A LITTLE BIT GUILTY ABOUT THE SUBJECT OF THIS TALK. It wasn't entirely my fault; I woke up after chairman Steve Green had persuaded me, and found the words 'You are giving a Novacon talk on your book *The Leaky Establishment*' tattooed on my typing finger. Dially I remembered the terrible hours of coercion in the bar, and how Steve finally clinched it by offering me a two-week all-expenses-paid holiday in lovely Ireland at the home of Anne McCaffrey. It was either that or give this talk.

The guilt is because I reckon I'm here on false pretences: I ought to be talking about science fiction, or at any rate fiction, and most of *The Leaky Establishment* is in fact autobiography. It does actually contain an SF idea, and an exceedingly daft one too, but... Once or twice I've read a few chapters to people (this was before all my friends bought earplugs), and was boggled to find that they fell about laughing not at the jokes but at what I thought were ordinary, unfunny details of Civil Service life. Like the routine way in which, in my part of the Civil Service, large randy security men were forever groping your thighs on the pretext of searching for suspicious lumps of plutonium hidden in your jockstrap.

Perhaps I should start by explaining how I ended up chasing neutrons for five years at the Atomic Weapons Research Establishment - a job which has failed to impress anybody in the whole world except Greg Benford. 'Why did you quit Big Science Biz?' he asked me in tones of concern. I told him how much a grateful British government pays its weapons physicists, and he fainted.

So it is time to tell the true story at last. A story of shame and degradation, of pitiful struggling against implacable necessity, and above all, of hangovers. Long ago in the mists of 1974 I woke up with a hangover - some things never change - and discovered that all my mates at Oxford had been applying for jobs. I personally had been busy celebrating my physics finals, such a major event in the Langford career that I celebrated more or less continuously for six months before it happened.

Since I was more sensible then than I am now, I decided not to become a freelance writer. The lure of a free pint of fissy beer at Novacon 14 was balanced by the fact that in '74 I'd only sold one short story, to Ken Bulmer, for \$13.00p payable in several instalments; while my masterpiece *Sex Pirates of the Blood Asteroid* had merely collected rejection slips, from both

the 'Christian Science Monitor' and the 'Times Literary Supplement'. Accordingly I nipped round to the Oxford careers office and enquired about vacancies for top-salaried executives with a Jag provided by the company. At a pinch I was prepared to settle for an Aston Martin, but I kept that up my sleeve for the time being.

Of course it turned out that all the really cushy jobs had been snapped up, right down the line from Chairman of ICL to sagger maker's bottom knocker. Sneering at my pitiful grovelling, they explained that there were only five things for late, hungover physicists to apply for, and one of them was a U84G. I went away with the other four application forms and started inventing lies about my star-studded career to date.

Oh dear, it all comes back, like the curry I had at Mancon. I applied to IBM and they lost my application in the infallible data-processing system. I applied to the Post Office, and I needn't tell you how that application got lost. I applied to ICL, famous lame duck, with the promise that my as-yet untapped talents could make them even lazier. They actually invited me to spend a luxurious weekend at one of their places, and it was there that I made a huge tactical error - one which I am not repeating this Novacon. I tried to demonstrate what a reliable, responsible programmer I'd make, by not drinking much. I should have known this was a mistake when I reflected that ICL had already taken on Martin Hoare.\*

What was left was the Ministry of Defence. I approached their interview room with an ominous sense of doom and foreboding - which was in fact another hangover - convinced they were going to expose my pitiful ignorance with sudden trick questions like 'Newton's Laws of Motion: how many are there?' or 'E equals mc what?' Inside, this evil-looking fellow stared at me with the sort of expression seen on Joe Nicholas's face as he weighs the literary merits of the latest Perry Rhodan novel. He said: 'Mr. Langford, just one simple question. Can you explain to me the nature and significance of the Moshbauer effect?'

Thus it was that I became a scientific officer at Aldermaston; and only years after, when I'd shaken the radioactive dust of the place from off my shoes forever, did I tell anyone that the day before that interview, I'd been doing an Oxford physics practical on the Moshbauer effect.

There were a few other formalities, such as being Positively Vetted - which only sounds like Civil Service jargon for a vasectomy. Large thugs covered in hideous scars kept breaking down doors to interrogate people about my sexual preferences - I got the impression that they received some slightly inventive answers. At least I've never worked out why at one interview I was shown pictures of melons and asked about my reactions.

Around then came the first of the amazing incidents which I

[Martin Hoare is a well-known convention fan, a computer expert, and a confirmed non-testotester. -Ed.]

## A L B I O N W R I T

couldn't resist putting into the novel but which nobody can believe really happened. It was my last week in Oxford, the morning after the college ball, and I was rudely awakened at an unnatural hour - about twelve noon, as I remember. I staggered out in my dressing-gown to find another security investigator in the hallway, who explained that while interrogating me for three hours on the previous day while shining lights in my eyes, he'd mistaken the most important question of all. 'Mr. Langford', he said, 'are you... homosexual?' Suddenly I had the feeling that my perfectly ordinary dressing-gown was covered with exotic brocade in the Oscar Wilde fashion. Summoning up all my courage, I said 'No'. He went away.

Meanwhile, inside my room, a certain lady whose name I will not drag through the mire, but whom I later married, was giggling uncontrollably into the pillow.

My dressing-gown may have caused the Ministry of Defence to doubt, but the balance was tipped in my favour when a month or so later I and several others got arrested for detonating parts of Oxford with fireworks. This apparently showed the right spirit. The Crown Court judge actually said more or less this, and I felt a slight twinge of unease when (after slamming one of my mates with a two-year prison sentence) he expressed pious hopes that Mr. Langford's little put-down would do credit to his chosen career in the business of destroying human civilisation as we know it.

So I started five surreal years at AERE Aldermaston, and after the first six months I knew that no matter what it said in the Official Secrets Act, I could get away with putting almost every detail into a novel. Not only would everyone think it sheer fantasy, but the official press would not admit some things were true... One example that didn't get into *The Leaky Establishment* was the time when I was sitting casually in the reactor control room drinking tea, and a reputable nuclear scientist came sprinting through, clutching an object of classified size wrapped in a lab coat. This was in fact the core of Britain's Independent Nuclear Deterrent, which my superior officer wished to put away from the base before it exploded. It occurred to me that had I so much as moved my foot two inches and tripped him, there would have been a lot of interesting bits of plutonium on the floor, and later on some exciting newspaper publicity about the furore.

As a matter of fact, the way they flung the radioactive around I'm surprised there wasn't a cardboard box by the main exit with a sign saying 'PLUTONIUM HERE - KEEP OFF'. *THE KINKINISE TIDY*. One of my colleagues managed to lose a uranium sample in the 50 yards between his office and the reactor: the Area was mostly grass and we waited for ages in hope of seeing the results predicted by the best SF, such as a mutant patch of purple carnivorous grass entangling stray technicians in its deadly tendrils. All that actually happened was that one patch went a bit brownish, and the scientists stopped picking the weeds which every autumn grew around the reactor building in fairy rings. I thought it very sporting of them to let the security police have first pick just for once.

Some extremely nasty radioactive material was also involved in an experiment I designed, an experiment so classified that I can tell you nothing about it except that it happened in Nevada... By the way, if any of you have actually managed to outwit my publishers and bought a copy of *The Leaky Establishment*, please note a correction for the text. Thinking that Nevada was classified, I wrote Arizona instead, and only when the book was published did I find that everyone knew which state the Americans use for their underground tests. Speaking of which, I came across the interesting fact that in one such test, a beam of radiation was supposed to go through a little hole to do things to a poor defenceless mass of test animals. The hole was a little over a quarter of an inch. You may have had misgivings about the American strike capability, but I bet you hadn't realised they could fail to hit something at two hundred yards' range with an atomic bomb.

Where was I? There was this experimental capsule, whose destination I cannot reveal to you, incredibly fragile yet containing extremely dangerous substances. It stood on a laboratory bench, all that remained was to put the lid on. A trained British craftsman set to work, the lid stuck and wouldn't go on straight; and he started hitting it with a big hammer. I don't quite remember how and I and five other scientists managed to teleport outside the suddenly closed door.

After all this it was no surprise when Aldermaston had its big flap about plutonium contamination. Some people contained so much of the stuff, they could hardly walk for the weight. The famous signs appeared in the AERE library, saying 'To avoid assembling a critical mass, staff are requested not to gather in groups of more than five and to remain at least 0.6 metres apart (1.2 metres if wet).' Everybody who'd so much as looked at the plutonium entry in the periodic table was ordered to report for checking under the Whole Body Monitor, an elaborate device using sophisticated electronics to tell whether or not you had a whole body. Aldermaston's enthusiasm for investing in this

essential safety equipment was so great that the nearest monitor was twenty miles away at Harwell.

I duly went there and had my inmost secrets probed: they warned me that there might be a certain amount of experimental error in the reading, and those of you with an intensive scientific training may judge that this was correct. Here's the letter I eventually received from the Superintendent of Personnel Safety:

Dear Mr Langford

The estimate of plutonium in the lungs resulting from the whole body monitor tests at AERE Harwell on 19 October 1978 is minus thirty-nine nanocuries.

This result has been passed to the Dose Evaluation Panel for consideration...

You may mock, but I found it strangely reassuring to know I could playfully nibble a full 39 nanocuries of Pu before reaching the zero level of contamination. One good reason for my state of extreme purity and cleanliness - at least back in 1978 - was that I spent most of my time playing with computers instead of entering the regular independent Deterrent Eggs/Spoons Races. With the Aldermaston computer system, what got contaminated was my brain.

As I remember it, the outfit at AERE bore about the same relation to real computers as (in the organisational field) the BSFA Ltd does to IBM. The advanced programming facilities available to Britain's crack nuclear scientists consisted of a wide range of Jollys. The computer itself was in a sort of blockhouse guarded by swarms of security men almost as merciless and brutal as those at Seacom 84. Nothing could penetrate that computer's impenetrable defences! Nothing, that is, except the information flowing along handy, tappable cables to terminals around and even off the site. By terminals I mean, of course, teletypes. The whole thing must have been under a preservation order as a magnificent example of 1960s industrial archaeology.

Again I hit the problem of things which people refuse to believe. I had a bit in *Leaky* about an exciting arcade-action Space Invaders game which ran on a teletype. I've given up trying to persuade anyone that this was mere cold historical fact. You had to be there. There was real sense-of-wonder in reading the computer manual which went on about the elaborate defences of the AERE computer operating system, and then finding you could crash the system by compiling a perfectly legal program in FORTRAN.

My favourite memory is of a useful little feature which the computer staff themselves proudly offered to users: it was supposed to make it easy to scan through the information you had stored in the machine. It did. It also made it easy to scan through all the secret password files. They took away chips, and quite a few Jollys when I pointed this out. I suggested an OMB for contributions to national security would be in order, but the mean bugbears wouldn't give me one.

Computers are boring and I can hear the crash of catatonic bodies in the aisles, but I can't resist telling about the amazing Aldermaston micro. One day somebody had the bright idea of filling a van with radiation detectors so they could cruise the streets just like the TV-liege people spotting No 10's nuclear stockpiles. Like the one accidentally acquired by the hero of my book. (All the van ever did detect, I gather, was a radioactive patch on the road near Mortimer in Berkshire. Fell off the back of a lorry, I suppose.) I drew the short straw and had to suss out a microcomputer to analyse all the rubbish picked up by the detectors - I suppose it would have been embarrassing if hordes of security guards had burst from the van and I spent some time with Jollys, only to discover he was merely carrying an outside luminous watch.

The trouble was, this was the MoD and there were budget problems. I could sign for as many things as I liked which cost £50 or less, but the full weight of bureaucracy would land on the back of my neck if I dared write out a single chit for a forlorn amount like £450.00. We ended up buying some cheap chips, using quackish techniques to build a micro from scratch, while I spent eight weeks of my life writing machine code for the wretched thing. At last the great unveiling came, and to my ill-concealed surprise the whole shambles worked, and the AERE bigwigs looked on it and saw that it was good. So of course it was junked. After all, the project could now be given a big budget, and with a big budget there was no point of prestige value in the tiny little AERE micro. I was lucky. I spent a few thousand on a pretty minicomputer instead, and I was secretly pleased when it failed to work as well.

This was of course quite logical in bureaucratic terms, in the same way that it was logical for the scientists who actually did AERE's work to inhabit horrible disintegrating wooden huts on the far side of the marshy bit of the site, while mere parasites like typists and security men got luxury post-solarium houses by the main gate. Again, the logic of seniority meant that I had to be secretary of two nuclear policy committees and take all the

# ALBION WRIGHT

minutes, my chief qualification being that I was the only person on either committee who was deaf. The solution was to sit next to the committee chairman in an attitude of synchpancy and ignore all distractions, such as other people's voices. Those minutes were impressionist works of art, whole vistas of unspoken meaning conveyed in a few deft words like 'The Chairman agreed. The chairman disagreed. The chairman could not endorse the first proposal but was in sympathy with the second.' Scared by my appalling experiences on such committees, I find I'm now wickidly prejudiced against exciting events like BSFA meetings, even when the speaker is someone charismatic like Alan Dorey. In fact, especially when... no, I mustn't be cruel.

I'm also prejudiced against engineers. My main contact with engineering was when one rang up, explained that his section had spent two years working on some new and ever so classified substance, and could I now do all the theoretical background work for them in, say, one week? Ever willing to oblige (which means, ever willing to find an excuse for putting off my own urgent work), I asked for some vital information like the density of the stuff. 'Density?' he said, as though I'd made a suggestion so obscene he didn't want to admit he'd understood it. 'I'll ring you back', he said. After a week of what I suppose must have been massed research efforts by his entire engineering team, he rang me back. This time he sounded actively hostile: 'I've got the information you asked for. We've measured a piece of the material. It's 5mm by 10mm by 25mm, and it weighs umpteen grams. Can you work out the density from that?' Faintly I assured him that with the aid of a calculator I probably could.

Speaking of engineers leads naturally to engineers and, specifically, cranks. Every so often I'd get appalling wads of badly duplicated bums in my IN trays: as well as security regulations, these would be new theories of physics submitted to ANWR's front office and passed to the nearest convenient sucker (me), just in case they contained the ultimate secret of life, the Universe and everything. One chap had a brilliant, self-consistent theory of atomic and nuclear structure; I particularly liked the way in which every single element as yet discovered by science was a special case, an exception which proved the fellow's general rule. One of the predictions of this revolutionary theory was that nuclear weapons couldn't possibly work, and I thought it kind of the author to let us know. However, I was not judicious about him because he didn't even believe in the Mossbauer effect...

The best bit of alternative science to land on my desk was Robert Kingley Morison's *An Experiment With Space*. I quote:

'Strenuous but pathetic attempts have been made by terrestrial air forces to obtain possession of extraterrestrial knowledge by capturing an alien space vehicle...

This book suggests a more sensible approach. An Experiment With Space not only lessens the chance of a national monopoly on levitation but also takes us beyond the stage of idolising the Space Brothers.

Robert Morison conceived a simple idea for generating levitational forces in 1969; but not until August 1979 could he assemble enough scientific and philosophical thoughts for a book. Anyone who succeeds in mastering gravity will make possible a vast expansion of humanity's horizons - thus enabling men to change.'

He doesn't say what it'll enable women to do. Anyway the front cover blurb spills the Secret:

'Internal vortex lifts 9-metre disc by space dynamics: angular velocities of 20000 to 40000 revs/min mean molecules moving at 11 km/s. YOUR PLANET NEEDS YOU to consider and investigate possibilities that may radically transform civilisations. Like neutralising gravity and debunking materialism.'

The general idea is that molecules at the edge of this spinning disc are moving at orbital velocity and therefore the whole disc will naturally drift off into orbit. One of us dropped the author a note asking why CERN at Geneva, with particles circling its storage rings at nearly the speed of light, hadn't passed the orbit of Pluto long ago. I understand the reply was that that was part of the world-wide cover-up, and that to fool the public CERN had been secretly bolted down.

My collection of anecdotes about the horrible grittiness of Aldermaston used to be endless. Those Mo policemen fondling helpless young scientific officers' thighs. The smearing gas security system whereby all suspects to smudge out plutonium were presumed to happen in the evening so there was no need to spot-check people or cars at lunchtime (this, no doubt, based on close study of office hours at the Kremlin). The 5MW reactor from the days before the energy crisis was invented, which blithely threw away its entire heat output into the surrounding air (yes, it was a swimming-pool reactor; yes, somebody did fall in). The

even more conservation-conscious site heating, with live steam being carried around a five-mile perimeter fence by above-ground pipes which not only leaked at the joints but to boost heat-loss by radiation were painted black. The Royal Visit with the Queen being treated to a display of amazingly incontinent MoD guard-dogs. The local newspaper which really believed and printed the story that civil scientists had to drink twelve pints of beer each day to flush nuclear contamination from their bodies.

Well, I could go on forever, and by the time I'd finished writing the bloody book - including all this and more - I felt I had gone on forever. (The same drained feeling is experienced by many people who've read it.) So for further sordid details I refer you to the novel itself: Just go to any major bookshop and they will explain they've never heard of it. Except for Rog Peyton, who with a huge and enthusiastic smile will say, 'Sold out.' That's the hardback: I'm glad to say Sphere Books decided to publish a paperback conveniently in time for Novacon, but unfortunately they picked Novacon 15.

I got out of Aldermaston in 1980 for half a dozen reasons. One was that, as I've said until even I'm bored with hearing me say it, I found I was earning less than civil servants who were of technically lower rank but worked in booming areas like unemployment benefit: this was galling to my elitist soul. Again, Joseph Nicholas used to spit on me in the streets, and big Rob Holdstock would accost me saying 'I want to know what you do viswistock those poor neutrons at Aldermaston; I won't understand a word of it but I have a right to know.' Again, the MoD wouldn't even let me take unpaid leave to extend my coming TAFF trip to America. Again, I had contracts to write some books and wanted to do them in peace, without security men poking their soiled fingers into my nice clean prose as they did with War In 2020: 'We don't like the implication here that neutron bombs are harmful', they would complain. Other reasons included conscience, an ever-growing dislike of having my thighs groped, and the thought that one day I could write rude things about the whole place.

You may wonder if any of these rude things got me into trouble. I did have one alarming phone call: 'This is Aldermaston Security. We're somewhat upset by this book of yours, *The Leaky Establishment*, and we'd advise that all copies be immediately withdrawn from sale pending a possible court action.' While I was still saying 'I want to know what you do viswistock those poor neutrons at Aldermaston; I won't understand a word of it but I have a right to know.' Again, the MoD wouldn't even let me take unpaid leave to extend my coming TAFF trip to America. Again, I had contracts to write some books and wanted to do them in peace, without security men poking their soiled fingers into my nice clean prose as they did with War In 2020: 'We don't like the implication here that neutron bombs are harmful', they would complain. Other reasons included conscience, an ever-growing dislike of having my thighs groped, and the thought that one day I could write rude things about the whole place.

The book is called *The Truth About The Flaming Choolies*.

I wrote my first rude things about ANWR in *New Scientist*, under a pseudonym of course - 'Roy Tapper', who later became the hero of the book. Following this...well, here are the inner secrets about how books get commissioned. Maxim Jakubowski had told me it was worth going round to Frederick Muller Ltd with a few book proposals, because they were owned by Sirioesh TV, had pots of money and gave you super expensive-account lunches. So I made an appointment to drop in and discuss a heap of brilliant book ideas which I then quickly wrote. 'What time?' they asked. 'Oh', I said casually, 'How about an hour before lunch?'

Katie Cohen, the Muller editor, smiled sweetly as she tore each of my ideas to tiny little shreds until there was a hollow reverberating emptiness in both my briefcase and my brain. 'You haven't any more ideas?' she said. In panic I searched my pockets and found a crumpled version of the *Scientist* article, and said 'Maybe I could base something on this sort of thing, sort of autobiographical...' For the next half-hour Katie did the most brilliant selling job I've seen, convincing herself that a wonderful novel this could be, while I sat there, silent except for strange inner rumbles and hoping for lunch. At last she looked at her watch. 'Send us a synopsis and we'll send you a contract', she said. 'And now I'll have to say goodbye because it's lunching with someone.'

After that, there seemed nothing to do but write the book - otherwise the day would have been wasted altogether. The trouble is that, having disposed of that particular section of my autobiography, the next novel should logically be about the joys of freelance writing and how proud one feels to create the vital raw material people keep leeching from. This, alas, is the sort of thing that's so depressing, it's fit for nothing but the Booker Prize shortlist. Maybe I'll write a relatively cheerful SF novel about nuclear holocaust instead.

If so, I must try to pick a better title than *The Leaky Establishment* - the problem with which is that if you mention it often enough to an audience, the word 'leaky' has a subliminal effect which keeps people leeching from. This, alas, is the sort of thing that's so depressing, it's fit for nothing but the Booker Prize shortlist. Maybe I'll write a relatively cheerful SF novel about nuclear holocaust instead.

(This speech has previously appeared in *Xyster*)

**KITeworld** - Keith Roberts  
(Gollancz, 1985, 288pp, £8.95)  
Reviewed by Chris Bailey

**CURIOUS AND UNSETTLING PLACES.** THESE WORLDS Keith Roberts creates, not worlds transformed by the effects of technology-as-magic or through the wholesale dislocation of reality, but our own world, seen through a mirror slightly flawed, wherein one or two items commonplace to us are missing, and their locations peripheral to us, assume a disconcerting emphasis. Canals, combine harvesters, or traction engines, perhaps - and now kites.

I felt uneasy rather than disconcerted - a kite is a summer afternoon's fancy, a child's toy. Still, these are Kites, proper nouns. While the folk of Kiteworld understand the principle of the wing and come to develop the internal combustion engine, either they fail to put two and two together, or they lack the will to do so, because although the Kite's functions might then be performed more efficiently, the emblematic tradition would be lost. The flyers hang above the border, guarding the Realm against an incursion of Demons from the Badlands, yet the pre-launch ritual seems just as important, a priest in attendance, the Kitemaster sprinkling oil and earth. The kites, you begin to realise, are crosses brandished against vampires; and while the flyers achieve ends which are both practical and totemic, they also may have a private beast in view, something different to that they are ostensibly seeking. Raoul has an aerial battle with the demons of sexuality; the enigmatic Canwen contemplates the Void, a 'State, in which there is no scale'.

For Keith Roberts might give us the trappings of a baroque science fiction piece, but his gift - at least, until the final scenes of this novel - is to ensure that the trappings do not overwhelm the individual. The Badlands, for example, offer easy snares for those who would take the Kiteworld too literally. These lands which surround the Realm shine in the dark and their inhabitants are stunted and coloured a translucent blue and you can see their inside workings. 'I think men did it, to each other', one character says sturdily. Yet these are the post-holocaust visions of the popular imagination and as such far too garish. It's all a form of words, says another character. Does it matter how we describe an agent of Hell? As a post-holocaust statement, *Kiteworld* creaks in a strong breeze. As a human metaphor, it works just fine.

*Kiteworld* is a dark and troubled book. It opens with a strong sense of finality - 'The ground crew had all but finished their litany. They stood in line, heads bowed, silhouetted against the last dull flaring from the west' - and while there is a sense of order still present there, anarchy looms ever larger as the book progresses. We also detect improvements in technology and signs of material prosperity (by the end, fast cars, cigarettes and bluejeans). Maps are nonetheless difficult to obtain, a faint echo of *Pavane*, perhaps 'it wouldn't do to have the ordinary folk find out too much about the land they live in' - but, generally speaking, the ordinary folk of *Kiteworld* have more than their counterparts of *Pavane*, whose repression in this respect was to be their long-term salvation. Is this modernity the downfall of *Kiteworld*? Keith Roberts doesn't say. More likely it denotes the external symptom of an inner rot.

The Demons, it becomes clear, are really within the Realm and within its subjects, the Badlands embracing a diseased

# BOOKS



REVIEWS EDITED BY

Paul Kincaid

body politic and entrapping closed states of mind. Two religious movements, the Middle Doctrine and the Variants, war for the souls of the people, the Middlemen's teachings of acceptance of the moment and submission to fate losing ground to the shriller dogmatism of the Variants and their extremist cousins the Ultras, who wholeheartedly adopt the new technology (automatic guns and armoured half-tracks). Against this background unfold the stories of several individuals and their responses to the general cancer. (The book comprises a series of linked novellas, in the familiar Roberts' manner.) The first half of the book is the more powerful, taking as its theme the spread of the decay into personal relationships. 'Kitecadet' and 'Kitemistress' introduce the idea of innocent sexuality being soured and this atmosphere is maintained in 'Kitecaptain' and 'Kiteerrant', the first a story of incest, the second of the unprincipled and pitiless betrayal of simple trust. 'Kitecaptain' and 'Kiteerrant' are quite the best pieces in the book, at least if you relish a harrowing read. The manner in which Roberts creates scenes of warmth and happiness and then savages the still breathing bodies of his characters is masterly, in an excruciating and ultimately depressing sort of way.

Later in the book, *Kiteworld* becomes an even grimmer place, yet the depression lifts and the emotional atmosphere mellows with the introduction of the character of Velvet, a curious creation who is lovable, amusing and irritating by turns. She seems a self-consciously Dickensian exercise, a cross between Little Nell and the Artful Dodger - she don't talk proper, but 'as an 'baird of gold. Velvet is wicked, but without malignancy, her activities directed towards her vision of owning a little house with baskets of flowers on the windowsills. Clearly, there are degrees of evil. Roberts is enlarging the scope of his moral exploration in anticipation of the conclusion he is driving for.

Yes, the ending. There's nothing wrong with it and there's everything wrong with it. We learn that the centre cannot hold, that the Kites are no defence as the fire runs up the strings and that the best that can be hoped for is that a few pieces of human flotsam may be washed up on a brave new shore. Morally, and in terms of the Realm as metaphor, it is a fine ending. Narratively, it jars horribly. Science fiction paraphernalia intrudes; melodramatic reunions are staged. I would only consider it as being over the top, intended to make us view all a what has gone before in a different light. I then rejected that, yet even if it were so, the effect would be the same, the effect of

the conclusion not being true to what has gone before, to Roberts' real attributes: his loving and detailed evocation of places, countryside, physical things, even machinery, and his sensitivity to human emotions and possibilities.

Perhaps it is worth noting that some readers have detected a slight sense of such an imposition at the end of *Pavane*. I have tried not to labour the comparisons with *Pavane* - a book with which Roberts made a rod for critics of future volumes to beat him with - although the publishers push the association (and who can blame them), citing in support of the Roberts' cause Victoria Glendinning's review of the recent reissue - 'a cross between Thomas Hardy and Russell Hoban'. As I recall the review, she also considered *Pavane* to be a very good book, so good that it overflowed the confines of Gollancz's SF packaging. You can argue about that amongst yourselves. Meanwhile, *Kiteworld* is quite a good book, but the ending ensures that its SF packaging is appropriate.

**VIRICONIUM NIGHTS** - M. John Harrison  
(Gollancz, 1985, 150pp, £8.95)  
Reviewed by Barbara Davies



**VIRICONIUM NIGHTS** IS A COLLECTION OF SEVEN short stories, set in the strange, haunting, mythical world of Viriconium and its citizens, last met in M. John Harrison's previous book, *In Viriconium*. It is not an easy collection to read and the author starts it with the following quotation:

'Nothing stays. Nothing is completed. I can make nothing whole from it, however small.'  
Elizabeth Taylor, *A Wreath of Mosses*

So be warned.

The first story - 'The Luck in the Wad' - is the strangest. Here is no gentle introduction to Viriconium (or Viriko or Oroconium as it is variously called). The reader is thrown in at the deep end and left to drown. Concepts and items are described rather than named and it is not until later stories that one begins to get an inkling of what is going on. The plot is about poet Ardwick Crone's search to give meaning to, and hence banish, his recurring dream about a lamb's head given to him

during the ceremony - 'The Luck in the Head. This ceremony ends with the head of a lamb being cooked in meat pie which are said to be lucky. Cromie gets caught up in a plot to kill the ruler of Uroconium which goes horribly wrong.

The story is vividly written - horrid images abound. There is an air of despair and decay. I wish I had not read it because its colours remain indelibly fixed.

A dumb, doughy shape writhed and fought against itself on her palms, swelling quickly from the size of a dried pea to that of a newly-born dog. It was, he saw, contained, by a damp membrane, pink and grey, which it burst suddenly by butting and lunging. It was the lamb he had seen in his dreams.' (p23)

'The Lamia and Lord Cromie' seems a much more straightforward story. It is in the fantasy vein. The 6th Lord Cromie is the latest in a long line whose fate is to kill and be killed by a monster - the Lamia. To fulfill his destiny, Cromie and his companions, the dwarf Morgante and the beanope Dissolution Kahn, track the beast by its trail of destruction and confront it. The confrontation is not as Cromie expects, however, and the inevitable outcome is no longer so. I will not give the game away as it relies on a plot twist in the last few pages.

The writing is clearer and the story has great impetus once the stage has been set for the denouement. The images are again vivid.

'The trees of the interior were of quite unknown kinds, black and burnt-orange, with smooth-barked tapering stems; their tightly woven foliage, rarely more than fifteen feet above the surface of the bog, tinted the light a frail organic pink which seemed sometimes to be veined like the lobe of a very delicate ear.' (p51)

'Strange Great Bins' - the third story - has already been published in *Interzone*. (Some of the other stories have also been previously published.) It concerns a sinister and his reminiscences about his Uncle Pinsep and his passion for Viriconium's famous dancer, Vera Ghillera. The prose is straightforward but the plot is elliptical.

'After every performance she held court in a dressing room done out with reds and golds like a stick of sealing wax. There was a tiger-skin rug on the floor. You never saw such dim yellow lamps, brass trays, and three-legged tables decorated with every vulgar little onyx box you could mention.' (p70)

'Viriconium Knights' (a pun on the book's title) is the fourth story and concerns the street gang Fractal of the Locust Clan. Retz has to flee to escape retribution. Harrison makes the outcome unclear by a rather obscure device - namely a magical tapestry.

'Out of the tapestry drifted the scent of roses on a waxy evening. There was the gentle sound of falling water, and somewhere a single line of melody repeated over and over again on a stringed instrument. The knight in the scarlet armour took

his queen's hand and kissed it.' (p93)

The fifth story, 'The Dancer from the Dance', is another obscure tale. Harrison quotes as inspiration for this: 'I'll be your dog' - Kia-Ora advert! There are three main characters, two of whom we have met before. The dancer Vera Ghillera, the dwarf Kiss-O-Suck (previously Morgante) and the aristocratic hoodlum Egon Rhys become involved in a trip into no-mans land, here called Allmans Heath, in search of a giant lout. While there they experience inspiration in whatever they are best at. There is no explanation for the strange events that occur.

'As she (Vera) danced she reduced the distinction between Heath and sky. The horizon, never convinced of itself, melted. Vera was left crouching and recrossing a space steadily less definable. A smile came to Kiss-O-Suck's lips... 'She's floating!' (p120)

'Lords of Misrule' concerns the inspection of the fortifications near the house of the Yule Grave by Lord Cromie. Uroconium is at war with some unknown force. The plot is about the interaction between the Yule Grave and his family and Lord Cromie. I enjoyed this story the most. There is a sense of space and air - it felt like the inspection of a Roman outpost by a centurion.

'There were deep muddy furrows in the gateways where the stone carts went in and out. The wind came in gusts from the south and west, bringing a rainy smell and the distant bleat of sheep. The dwarf crouched on the slopes above us shifted their branches uneasily and sent down a few more of last winter's brownish withered leaves.' (p125)

Finally, 'A Young man's Journey to Viriconium' accompanies us by bringing together the Earth we know and Viriconium. Set in Yorkshire it is concerned with the boundaries between Earth and Viriconium and the possibility of travel between the two. Dr. Petromax testifies that there is a way between the worlds - nothing glamorous as this is a Harrison story, just a mirror in the lavatory of the Merrie England cafe. The contrast is between mundanity and insanity and is reflected in the characters' actions and words. Harrison's descriptive powers are strong as usual.

'When I remember Piccadilly it isn't so much by the flocks of starlings which invaded the gardens at the end of every short winter afternoon, filling the paths with their thick mouldy smell and sending up a loud mechanical shrieking which drowned out the traffic, as by the latter of pots, the smell of marzipan or a match just struck, wet woolen coats hung over one another in a corner...' (p147)

This collection left me with mixed feelings. It is undoubtedly masterful in its use of both language and mood. It leaves behind many resonances. It is, however, not enjoyable. To quote from the author himself (cf. Harrison's entry in the *Nicholls Encyclopedia of SF*):

'The best fantasy is a terra incognita. The reader is first lured into it and then abandoned. If he doesn't enjoy his subsequent bewilderment he should be reading *Which Car* instead.'

Reviewed by Paul Kinsland

M. JOHN HARRISON HAS BEEN WRITING ABOUT THE CITY of Viriconium since his first novel, *The Pastel City* (NEL, 1971). It is a landscape of the imagination, infinitely mutable, by turns medieval England, Weimar Germany, fin de siècle Paris, Fascist Vienna and Renaissance Florence. Nothing is still within these stories, even the geography changes, seemingly at will. Ignate Retz, fleeing those who would kill him, stumbles into a devastated city, crossed by 'meaningless trenches', and looking as if it has been devastated overnight by a war. Vera Ghillera and her companions discover, on the tiny island of Allman's Heath, an infinite landscape in which strange dreams and desires take on life.

Yet the most mutable element of all is history. No rigid chronology binds this city, yet cannot read through the sequence of stories and novels and place them all into any set order. Main characters in one story play a minor role in the next, or even become creatures from a work of fiction. One who has died is likely to crop up alive and well in a later story, and otherwise appear to come after the first. Rulers, dynasties, schools of art and literature rise and fall. Harrison says it more succinctly:

'History repeats over and again this one city and a few frightful events - not rigidly, but in a shadowy, tentative fashion, as if it understands nothing else but would like to learn.'

Harrison is the most elegant stylist writing fantasy, or indeed most forms of fiction, in this country. But he has a dash of vision, presenting an entropic state in which his cast of poets, dancers, and fighting men live their complicated, interlocking lives against a backdrop of vacant lots, crumbling tapestries, and an aging ruler whose stultifying reign is nearing its end. Yet for all its grimness, he clothes his creation with a rich and vivid cloth, so that for all its sense of things running down, of a sad, tired end, it also has a sense of life and attraction. A sense made real in the final story, perhaps the best one in the collection, 'A Young Man's Journey to Viriconium'. The journey, typically of Harrison, is never made; but Viriconium is part of the consciousness of a young man of our own world and time. He and others long to go there in all its decay and violence, Viriconium will prove an alluring parallel realm to our own sad reality.

With each book I have wondered how much better M. John Harrison can possibly get; and the question has yet to be answered. There seems no limit to his talent, and after reading this stunning, captivating work of staggering imaginative power, one is left wondering: what next?

NIGHT VOICES - Robert Aickman  
(Gollancz, 1985, 105pp, £8.95)  
Reviewed by Nigel Richardson

THE LATE ROBERT AICKMAN WROTE VERY peculiar, very idiosyncratic stories which escape easy classification. To call them ghost stories gives more indication of their cool elegance than calling them horror stories, but in this collection there is only one ghost, and that seems offstage, harmless and almost incidental. Perhaps it is best to follow the book's jacket in calling them 'strange stories' and hoping that this vague description will suffice. Aickman's stories are strange - at first glance they seem to be old-fashioned

## Night Voices



ROBERT AICKMAN  
Foreword by Barry Humphries

in both the way they are written and what they're about, but these deliberately archaic qualities only add to their strangeness.

The world Aickman describes is a kind of half-forgotten, half-mythical England, a place of nostalgia and dread, of middle-class austerity and routine, rather reminiscent of Eliot's Wasteland. The characteristic Aickman story tells of someone trying to escape from this claustrophobic stagnant but safe world after glimpsing a brighter, more vivid world in the longest and best story in this volume, 'The Stains', a middle-aged widower gives up his job and his friends in order to pursue a mysterious young girl he sees out on the moors. The Aickman devotee will know that the man is doomed from the moment he sees the girl, but Aickman manages to weave around the reader's expectations, toying with the conventions of the ghost and horror story so that the inevitable ending still packs a punch. 'The Stains' is a complex and sustained crescendo of anxiety and desire, both scary and sensual, and shows that Aickman was one of the few writers who could get the mix of sex and horror exactly right. With this story, together with 'The Trains', he also showed an ability to express the terrible beauty of the northern countryside, showing an unsentimental but awed view of nature as striking and morbid as Emily Brontë's.

Few of the stories in this collection would please a teacher of creative writing: Aickman's style relies heavily on allusion, hints and undercurrents, things unfinished and left unsaid. At the end of the sixty-one pages of 'The Stains' you don't really know what has happened to any of the characters. In other stories the meanings and conclusions are rarely clear. In 'Just a Song At Twilight' the ambiguous ambience could mean almost anything, but the elliptical events linger on in the mind like a fragment of a disturbing dream. The dream-like way in which Aickman's stories work recalls Kafka, Lewis Carroll and Gene Wolfe in the way the strange seems familiar and the familiar strange. In his introduction to this collection, Barry Humphries - yes, possums, that Barry Humphries - says that Aickman 'can evoke in a few lines of concentrated prose the tenebrous and oppressive atmosphere of a very bad and inescapable dream', and for once a book's

introduction is telling the truth. If you like spooky tales but find most of the stuff on the market to be laughable pornographic rubbish then this (and Aickman's earlier collections which really ought to be reissued in paperback, if anyone influential is reading) is what you should be reading.

**THE POWER OF TIME** - Josephine Saxton  
[Chatto, 1985, 222pp, \$9.95 (hardback)  
\$3.95 (paperback)]  
Reviewed by Mike Dickinson

THE FIRST TWO ISSUES OF CHATTO AND WINDUS' new SF line made a dramatic impact upon the retail trade and fans alike; indeed they are still prominently displayed in bookshops six months after publication. The publication of *The Power of Time* not only adds to this stature, but is itself remarkably significant.

In 1975 a symposium panel including such writers as Selwyn and McGuin agreed in their lamentation at the absence of a Josephine Saxton collection. At that time she was being published regularly in *Fantasy* and *Science Fiction* and paperback anthologies. Since then, not only have we had to wait ten years for that collection, but there have been years when her name seems totally to have vanished; it is probably significant that within this present collection only one story (and that published in 'Cosmopolitan') exists from the decade between 1972 and 1981.

This virtual exile becomes even more inexplicable when one looks at the stories collected. Previously, while it has been usual to be impressed by such stories as one has been able to track down, it has not been possible to realise her sheer versatility. Here laid-side by side are pure science fiction stories, horror stories, fantasy stories, parables, urban myths, and so on, and even what could be, but hopelessly is not, a piece of straight autobiography, yet all remain identifiably the property of the writer.

For one thing, the writer's sympathy remains resolutely with the outsider (again no bad thing, since this stance is one of the things that so many of us find so sympathetic about the genre). In 'Cover From Beyond the Dawn of Time', for example, a woman is assigned to a new commune. Food and society are both laid on and she seems to be a success - the only slight doubts being a peculiar smell about the unit, which quickly disappears, and her eccentric habit of reading. However, the commune is a sinister and a sativistic evil. Horror devotees will seize upon this reading habit and expect one of those usual solutions, such as stumbling across Lovecraft or Malleus Malificarum - in fact, her only books are the Guinness Book of records and a collection of curry recipes. Saxton conformed so devoted to stimulate that it is a disconcerting sense of humour; yet the story is convincingly chilling, both in its horrific element and its exposure of society.

Another utopian story is 'The Snake Who Read Chomsky', but here the Utopia is solely for each individual, and can be regarded as astonishingly. However, the pressure continually to achieve is devastating: a Thatcherite Utopia for yuppies perhaps. Against this background the story is one of bluff and double-cross of Le Carre proportions, as scientists seek advancement or perhaps diversion in a world so devoted to stimulate that it is 'famous for its dissolving architecture'; at any moment a balcony might disappear and drop people to their deaths. This did not happen so often that it was monotonous but often enough to be exciting' (p145).

As can be seen from this extract

Saxton's language is often deliberately simple, choosing exactly the right word, avoiding simile and metaphor. In fact, in only one story - 'Silence in Having World: Purple' - does it lapse from the highest control. This slightly dated story of one man's destruction of a rather psychodelic commune (on one level; the story is highly symbolic - another interpretation is a fable on the necessity for physical effort) is to me exhilarating in its word-and-colour play, but may be the book's only true minority taste.

But she can also use language sumptuously, as this description of cooking pigeon from 'Food and Love' shows:

'The sauce is perfect. It is not tainted, it is rich and mature. A smoke of garlic, and pearls of fat from bacon, each slice curled round like sleeping cats relaxed and striped. The mushroom gills are separate and erect: swimming and breathing creatures...' (p42)

I defy anyone to read the story and not salivate.

Succulent might perhaps best describe the rest of the stories. Some, such as 'The Power of Time' itself, and 'Dormant Soul' are works of near-genius. There are a couple of pieces that are just too slight and one story 'The Walls', that no longer works - a shame as there are some good stories not collected. Hopefully, the forthcoming Women's Press collection will remedy this.

Only two cheers for Chatto though. It seems almost suicidal after that start to release only one book six months later, and then to wait until February (as I understand the plan is) before releasing another. This is especially ridiculous as one of the books they are sitting on is Lucius Shepard's brilliant *Green Eyes*.

**BEARING AN HOURLASS** - Piers Anthony  
[Panther, 1985, 308pp, £2.50]  
**DAMIANO'S LOT** - R.A. Macavoy  
[Bantam, 1985, 256pp, £1.95]  
Reviewed by Helen McNabb

THESE TWO BOOKS DO HAVE CERTAIN THINGS in common. Both are placed on an Earth where magic is a fact of life and both have Satan as one of the characters, but after that all resemblance between them ceases. *Bearing an Hourglass* is the second in a series called *Incarnations of Immortality*, each novel being self-contained but related to the others. The hero in each one being an Incarnation, in this case the Incarnation of Time - Chronos, the old man in the white cape bearing an hourglass (hence the title). Norton, the hero, accepts the job as Chronos after an unhappy love affair and the story is concerned with his discoveries about the powers he has been granted while trying to foil the perfidious plots of Satan. Anthony has obviously put some thought into the logistics of the novel because there is considerable detail about how Chronos lives backwards against the flow of time and how he can use the hourglass to alter time. It is quite clever in many ways, the plot is well constructed and the space opera and fantasy spoofs are quite funny. I enjoyed them more than the rest of the book. But predictably Norton triumphs, so the only real interest in the novel is the time games Anthony plays if you like that sort of thing.

The Macavoy is very different. Where the Anthony is placed in the future, Macavoy used the past, the period of European history after the Black Death. This is again part of a series, volume two in a trilogy but not self-contained, there are various references back to the first volume. The hero, Damiano, is a witch who rejected his magic in volume one so that he

could develop his ability to play the lute, taught and encouraged by his teacher the Archangel Raphael. This book has an odd mixture of elements - Raphael and Satan are major characters, witches and magic an integral part of the plot but the background is plain mediaeval, people who are poor, unwashed and terrified of the plague, the Avignon Pope even makes an appearance to give Danilo a new lute! It is as though having done all the research Macavoy felt the need to use more of it than was strictly necessary to the plot, not all the ingredients mixed properly which gave the book an uneven texture.

Stylistically the two books are at opposite extremes, the prose in the Anthony is pedestrian and strictly utilitarian, that in the Macavoy strives for poetic fancy and falls badly enough to make me wince at times. Of the two I preferred the Macavoy, at least the characters had the vestiges of life, enough personality to be individual, whereas Anthony's were as cardboard as to be utterly unmemorable. Neither book inspired me with a wish to read either the rest of the series or other books by these authors; the Anthony is clever in a way but it read like a pot boiler, the Macavoy has more of the author's heart in it but doesn't reach the heights it was aiming for, if Macavoy had kept a firmer control of the plot and the prose it could have been a better book than it is. I can't honestly recommend either of them to anyone.

**WEST OF EDEN** - Harry Harrison (578pp)  
**CIRCUMPOLAR** - Richard A. Lupoff (332pp)  
[Granada, 1985, £2.50 each]  
Reviewed by L.J. Hurst

THESE ARE TWO ALTERNATIVE HISTORIES. I READ *Circumpolar* first but the joy with which I grabbed *West of Eden* after finishing it faded as I read on. Now having considered *West of Eden*, it is not a vastly greater book. If it were revised it could be improved but it could never be great, it is conceived in the wrong way. (*Circumpolar* does not seem so much to have been conceived as sneezed.)

*Circumpolar* is set in the 1920s on an Earth that has a Symmes Hole and a very slightly different history - World War One lasted one year in 1912 and Lenin is the Tsar's Prime Minister. Against this background two teams plan to race their bi-planes through the hole, along the core and emerge at the other end (i.e. inter-polar, not circumpolar). The American team consists of Howard Hughes, Charles Lindbergh and Amelia Earhart. For the Prusso-German rivals of two von Richthofens and a Princess. Inside the hole they find a couple of lost lands, one Prussian, the other Mayan, battles ensue and the Americans win. The Mayans have force fields and flying platons, the Prussians have flying model horses and secret mole machines for foreign conquest. A vast new geography of rivers, floating islands and lost nations is mentioned, and then almost ignored before the battles and hand to hand fighting of the pilots. What is even worse than the originality is the lack of clarity - with a Symmes Hole the world is described as being like a doughnut, which implies a vast entrance, yet the teams have difficulty in finding it, and have to wait the sides once inside. Perhaps Richard Lupoff was not thinking of a doughnut, perhaps he was thinking of an eccles cake.

Edward James reviewed *West of Eden* originally in Vector 123. He had mixed feelings, mine are more certain. The story is quite simple. Sixty-five million years ago the dinosaurs were not wiped out. One species evolved into a sentient, technologically advanced civilisation.

Population pressure and the glacial advance drives them to attempt to colonise the Florida Keys, where they meet opposition from primitive human tribes also driven south in America (the only continent in which humans exist). One hunter is captured as a boy, used by the reptiles in their internal political struggles, escapes as a teenager, then leads the tribes in a war of resistance that frees the continent of the Yilane.

The kick comes from the society and technology of the Yilane. The males are subordinate and hormonally controlled, females are vicious and intelligent, there are classes based on intelligence within the species, and all their technology is organically based - their photocopy is an animal with slots, genetically manipulated for the purpose, for instance.

The failure comes in two ways. Firstly, the expertise is not overwhelming. For instance, when the males give birth the reptiles - the reptiles never change the humans on the beaches. This is then taken to mean 'A third time to the beaches, certain death' (p239) which is statistically wrong. A 1 in 2 chance does not mean that after the second birth one would die but that of a group half would die. Since one has already given birth successfully it is more likely to be successful a second time, and its young would inherit that characteristic. It is the survival of the fittest. This denial of Darwinism is implicit in the whole imagination of the reptiles - the reptiles never change the humans back on it for their victory, yet they are constantly involved in genetic experiments. This is an inconsistency. There are others in the plot - the hero's reptile mistress is not killed by his deliberate knife attack, the humans abandon the spear in the chest as a weapon because of the Yilane's breast bones, yet the same mistress is able to stab a rival with an arrow and kill her. But the plot couldn't continue without that sort of machiavellian success. And the inconsistencies continue even in the notes in the end. A selection of Yilane history is given - they count in base 8 so they have no numbers 8 or 9. Despite this they manage to talk of 854 of a population.

But the second failure and my greatest reason for rejecting *West of Eden* is that it is an excuse for slaughter. Both sides practise genocide. And I believe that, consciously or unconsciously, it is an epic novel written to provide grounds for large scale killing. In that it is like too many other books. Paradoxically, perhaps, the convention hides the cliché.

**FANTASY AND MIKESIS: Responses to Reality in Western Literature** - Kathryn Hume  
[Methuen, 1984, xvi + 213pp, #14.50 (hardback) #6.95 (paperback)]  
Reviewed by David V. Barrett

THIS IS AN ACADEMIC WORK, WRITTEN FOR English Literature students by an associate professor of English at Pennsylvania State University. As such it suffers, for the ordinary reader, from an over-use of technical terms: polysyndeton, syntactic narremes, syntagmatic, paratactic and diatonic were just a few of the words I had to search for (usually unsuccessfully) in a dictionary.

Hume's working definition of fantasy is firstly a 'self-enclosed "fantasy world" detached from consensus reality' (p21). The opening chapter, 'Critical approaches to fantasy', shows diagrammatically how the world as perceived by the author affects his work, which in turn affects the reader's perception of his own world.

She then looks at historical perspectives on fantasy and realism before

going on, in the main body of the book, to examine how fantasy is used in the literature of illusion (invitations to escape reality), of vision (introducing new realities), of revision (proposals for improving reality) and of disillusion (making reality knowable).

The final section of the book examines the functions of fantasy, and attempts to show why it is used. But I'm afraid that any book that has chapter sub-heads like 'Cosmological didacticism', 'Degrees of dislocation and techniques for introducing it', and 'Synergistic interaction between images' has to work hard to grab my attention, and Hume just did not work hard enough.

I spent much of my time spotting gaping holes in the works she cites. For example, she over-uses Vonnegut's *Breakfast of Champions*, Stoppard's *Rosencranks* and Goldstein's *Dead*, and Coover's *The University Baseball Association*, J. Henry Wadsworth's *Stranger in a Strange Land*, I will Fear No Evil and Time Enough for Love, and that the concept of *Fantastic Voyage* was Asimov's own creation (though she does point out that 'the submarine is more than a little like Cinderella's coach if we ignore the scientific trimmings' (p159) - I wonder how the good Doctor would react to that?) and yet nowhere does she mention the bleak realism of Mervyn Peake's *the Gormenghast* trilogy, or D.M. Thomas's *The White Hotel* (though she has *Freud* popping up everywhere), or the 1980s equivalent to Vonnegut, William Kottrik, or two masters of dislocation, in totally different ways, Samuel A. Delany and Philip K. Dick, or two of the great fantasy classics of the 19th, John Crowley's *Little, Big* and Mark Twain's *Wife's Tale* (though the latter might have been published just too late to come to her attention; a shame, because she devotes five pages to discussion of the winged horse).

There are also numerous inaccuracies which especially in an academic work should not occur. For example, Anne McCaffrey becomes Ann, and the author of *A Canticle for Leibowitz* becomes William Miller.

The book is well enough planned; reading the introduction to each section gives a reasonable overview. Unfortunately, in the mass of words, the structure becomes lost to the reader. A scholarly textbook such as this would benefit from having stepped topic sub-heads to help the reader to see how each sub-section relates to the whole.

Yet there are definitely points worth considering in this book. Rather than pick from here and there, it is worth quoting from just one paragraph (p162):

'Many ideas need only minimal development. Fantasy, for an writer, may have impact when trenchant. Too great a length can trivialise even a good idea. What mars so much popular fantasy is either the author's inability to gauge the proper dimensions of his creation or his failure to enter far enough into the fantasy. For an action-based fantasy to escape the banal, the fantasy must affect the plot and characters in ways which would not be readily duplicated by other settings. Perhaps the greatest weakness of fantasy fiction is that good ideas are so plentiful that writers have not felt pressed to develop them lovingly and imaginatively. But the good material is there, be it science, politics, philosophy, or psychology, man's future, man's nature, man's happiness, or man's willings. Some of these topics have been better approached through some form of



fantasy than through realism, because a realistic treatment lets readers rely too heavily on their own standards and cultural assumptions. Fantasy helps liberate both author and audience from such sloth.'

Not recommended for the average SF or fantasy reader, but the serious Eng. Lit. student might well find it useful.

#### THE SOFT MACHINE: CYBERNETIC FICTION

- David Porush

[Methuen, 1984, 248pp, \$10.95 (hardback) \$4.95 (paperback)]

Reviewed by Nik Morton

THIS BOOK, WHICH ATTEMPTS TO DEFINE A NEW literary genre, cybernetic fiction, is not an easy read, but it is, on balance, worth the effort. Quite openly, Professor Porush admits to stealing the title from William Burroughs' novel; he believes the metaphor apposite and is aptly giving us a machine softened by a Burroughs. It is only one of the so-called post-modernist authors examined in some depth; also featured under this cybernetic fiction umbrella are Barth, Vonnegut, Pynchon, Beckett, McIlroy and Barthelme. These authors were selected as their work over the last thirty years concerns some aspect of the communications or computer revolution, or confronts the 'deeper implications of the mechanisation of man on some metaphorical level'. What appears to differentiate these authors' works from 'such larger pulp genres of science fiction, in his imagination is either glorified or blamed but always projected into some future, other worldly, or purely imaginary realm', is that they are self-reflexive and draw attention to the materials and forms of their own construction. In effect, the texts appraise the reader that they are artefacts of human creation, and do not presume to suspend disbelief. Because the theme and form of this literary sub-genre derive from cybernetics, Porush terms it cybernetic fiction.

Throughout literary history, the machine has been threatening yet fascinating, superior to and yet paradoxically inferior to its users/users. It has been shunned for fear of its iconoclastic, apocalyptic, mind-expanding visions, for thinking the unthinkable. Now, it would seem, Porush feels the label of SF not good enough for the above-named authors though much of their work contains SF symbols and motifs. Having read his ingenious exposition, there is certainly some credibility in proposing the new label, though I suspect it will not be widely adopted outside academia.

#### THE LAYS OF BELERIAND - J.R.R. Tolkien

(Edited by Christopher Tolkien)

[George Allen & Unwin, 1985, 333pp, \$14.95]

BROOMFIELD DRIVE - K.V. Beiley

[Triffid Books, Val de Mer, Alderney, 1985, 32pp, £2.00]

Reviewed by Helen McIsabb

THIS BOOK IS FOR TOLKIEN COMPLETISTS ONLY. If it was by anyone other than Tolkien it would have been lucky to find its way into print and would be very unlikely to see the kind of sales which it will probably achieve. It chiefly consists of two long unfinished poems and copious textual explanations by the editor, there are fragments of other poems and a commentary on one of the poems by C.S. Lewis, none of which adds up to gripping best-seller reading. I found it difficult to decide how to approach these works, because there are different paths which will lead to different conclusions, all equally valid. Should the poems be judged as poetry? Did

Tolkien mean them to be judged with twentieth century poetry? The answer must be so, nevertheless to criticise them as poetry of the valid twentieth century, is just what they are. Another approach is to judge them in accordance with what the author was trying to do, do they achieve what he set out to achieve and if so into what context can they be placed? Should they be compared on merit with *Beowulf* and long narrative poems of the eleventh century, or just left in a Middle Earth context, part of the Tolkien opus and beyond ordinary critical standards. Different people will consider all of these alternatives as the correct one, so I shall attempt to answer the questions they raise briefly.

The poems are 'The Lay of the Children of Hurin' which is written in the alliterative verse form belonging to Anglo Saxon literature; the second major poem is 'The Lay of Leithian' which is written in octosyllabic rhyming couplets; the other fragments I shan't bother to comment on. Only those who were familiar with the skillfully written would have been surprised had they not been, Tolkien was a scholar of some repute, so the alliterative verse is probably a model of its type, it always all the laws it should, as do the couplets. Both flowed well, there was little endstopping and when read aloud the dreadful tendency to 'te-tum' the rhyming couplets was easy to avoid. However Tolkien obeyed many other rules of the alliterative verse form so that to the modern ear it sounds quaint and archaic, the elevated artifice of language which was natural and admirable to Anglo Saxon poets sounds only peculiar to a modern audience. When looking at it from the scholar's view it is easy to appreciate what Tolkien was doing, but reading it as a story it is too distanced by the style, I'd prefer to go back to *The Silmarillion* and read it in prose. 'The Lay of Leithian' is less obscure but it suffers from other faults common to all Tolkien's poetry. The poetry has always been my least favourite part of Tolkien's works because, except for occasional lines, it is hackneyed; he gets more beauty across in some of the prose passages than in any of the poetry. For example 'The Lay of Leithian' lines 529-30

'her feet twinkle wandered roaming  
In misty mazes in the gloaming'  
is worthy of Wordsworth at his absolute worst, but Tolkien, although the poems are mostly better than that, never equals Wordsworth at his best. His originality is as a storyteller, not as a poet. Thus as poetry these works do not deserve great praise, even remembering that none of them are complete and although Christopher Tolkien has edited the different versions to establish a form he considers likely, whether his father would have considered them suitable for publication is debatable.

As part of the Middle Earth opus they are of interest because of the vast quantities of textual comparison the editor includes: alternative readings, name changes, story changes, and so on; it's also got a brilliant index - people should know from that index it fills in much of the background on the development of the stories which is fascinating for some, even if of only tepid interest to others. As poetry of the present day it is of no real value because it has no great originality to establish a style or a tradition; it is a scholarly exercise in older verse styles it is skilful and does what Tolkien wanted, but within those limitations it has no extra spark to make it more than an exercise, it doesn't have enough eloquence to stand alone as poetry. It does fill in a little cracks of the Middle Earth saga, but whether you think it worth buying on such slender grounds is up to you.

The Bailey poems are fun. Mostly based

on nursery rhymes, the originals are easy to recognise and have been wittily updated into an SF context with a technical ease which makes reading them a pleasure. I read them and laughed and I'll read them to my kids. I much preferred them to the Tolkien.

#### THE FROZEN CITY - David Arscott and David J. Marl

[Allen & Unwin, 1984, 231pp, £2.95]

A FLIGHT OF BRIGHT BIRDS - David Arscott and David J. Marl

[Allen & Unwin, 1985, 229pp, £0.95]

Reviewed by Sue Thomason

THESE TWO RATHER ODD BOOKS ARE POLITICAL fantasies, or extended parables, set in the same cosmos. In the first book, Tom, wandering adolescent and innocent, enters the frozen and repressive City in search of his father. The City is ruled by terror and the divisive violence of the Red Blade. Everyone is, or may be, an informer, a spy, an assassin. The ground beneath the City is beautiful, inhabited only by a handful of the fortunate, removed from the rest of the world. They will not act to liberate the City, lest their own peace be disturbed...

The second book concerns the adventures of identical orphan twin brothers. One has been raised in a monastery, the other in a wealthy, worldly home. They are each given a disturbing message on their fifteenth birthday, and leave the lives they have known in search of each other, a past, and a future. They are brought together, after various adventures, by a beautiful deaf-mute girl.

Both books have an uncomfortable power to them, a power which is never quite defined or focussed. It is easy to allegorise the events of either book; e.g. the second could be read as reach-me-down Jungian psychology for young adults (males), with the *Sex and the Single City* as the last of the individual's ministrations, the *Anima*, while the first seems designed to raise a teenage reader's political consciousness. The stories, as stories, are somehow not quite all there.

For me, there were two main faults to the books. They both seemed to be striving for Significance and Meaningfulness in places where I would rather have just got on with the story - but that's simply because I like good stories; I like my didactic pills well-sugared. And both the books seemed to fall between the accepted boundaries of 'children's literature' and 'adults literature'. In fantasy, at least, good children's literature should be interesting and valuable to adults (e.g. the *Karthaea* trilogy), and good adults' literature should be accessible to intelligent children (e.g. Lord of the Rings). The librarians in me, with considerable regret, can see *The Frozen City* and *A Flight of Bright Birds* being relegated to the limbo of the Teenage Collection. And they deserve better than that.

#### JOURNEY BEYOND TOMORROW (189pp)

MINDMAP (216pp)

- Robert Shekley

[Gollancz, 1985, £0.95 each]

Reviewed by Nigel K. Richardson

THE TROUBLE WITH SATIRE IS THAT IT TENDS TO date at the same pace as whatever it is being sent up. Timeless stupidities like wage greed, bureaucracy and elitism produce timeless works such as *Candide* and *Catch 22*, books that will go on being read as long as there are Doctor Panglosses and Milo Minderbinderes around, whereas more specific satires like *Mordecai Riches* and *Conan* and similar works that swiped at the mores and predilections of the supposedly Swinging Sixties are already beginning to

seem like quaint period pieces, evoking nostalgia rather than laughter.

Although not in Voltaire's or Heller's class, Robert Shekley's three satirical novels have been well and are an amusing in the eighties as they were in the sixties. By setting them in other times, on other worlds and in other realities, Shekley has made these novels timeless in that even if the reader does not quite follow what is being satirised, he/she can at least read it as absurdist madcap fun.

**Journey Beyond Tomorrow**, from 1962, is the most ambiguous of these three releases. It is told as a group of folktales a thousand years or so after the events took place so that the adventures of Joones become entangled with those of King Arthur, Odysseus and others. The book owes a lot to Nathaniel West's *A Cool Million* (1934), in its tone and style. Like Lem in West's novel, Joones is a good-natured but easily manipulated character whose progress through the novel from unemployment to utopia to nowhere is not really a plot, but entirely due to being in the right (or wrong) place at the right time. The book, like the other two and most of Shekley's other novels, is rather episodic and towards the end contains some rather sub-Borgesian longeurs about naps and labyrinth, but it is rarely less than intriguing, amusing and readable - and more often than not all three.

**Windup** (1966) is one of the craziest books I've ever read. About two-thirds of the way through, the plot disappears with the same deliberate disregard for the reader's feelings as many a post-modernist work of the same period. Imagination overtakes coherency as aliens start talking in bad Mexican accents and anything goes. It's the sort of book that you either find unreadable or else you fall entirely under its feverish dreamlike spell. The title tells you all the information you really need to know about the plot: Marvin Flynn, a thirty-one year old adolescent, wants to see Mars the cheap way, by swooping minds with a Martian. Things go wrong, of course, and he finds himself having to swoop his mind with wisser creatures throughout the universe in order to get back to his own body. Other things happen, but I'm damned if I can summarise them...

**Dimension of Miracles** (1968) is the most satisfying and successful of the three, balancing the satire and surrealism of the previous two novels perfectly. Also the plot device of having the main character jump from planet to planet and reality to reality makes the episodic nature of the novel an integral part of the story rather than an unfortunate distraction. It has a shape and a flow that is lacking in the other two.

Fittingly, *Dimension of Miracles* carries a recommendation on the dust jacket from Douglas Adams. The similarity between Adams' radio series and this book has been noticed, by Adams amongst others. Shekley's hero hops from planet to planet with the Prize, and the Prize, which offers him not-very-useful information. He meets the man who built the Earth and finds himself in prehistoric times. Sounds familiar? Shekley is, however, sharper and funnier than Adams and his viewpoint goes beyond Adams' smart-aleck Footlights stuff. He also did it first.

Reading all three books one after the other is a bit of a strain; the relentless barely suppressed hysteria can become rather tiring after a few hundred pages. But taken one at a time these books are essential reading or re-reading, science fiction that is funny, inventive, wise, even sophisticated. And they're not qualities anyone can afford to miss.

#### THE MERCHANTS WAR - Frederik Pohl

[Gollancz, 1985, 209pp, £8.95]

Reviewed by Tom Jones

**THIS BOOK IS BILLED AS A SEQUEL TO THE Space Merchants by Pohl and C.M. Kornbluth**, and thus fits the present trend for established writers to produce sequels to their famous, usually 'golden age' books/series. Some reviewers seem to have automatically considered this a bad thing; personally I don't care who writes a book, or whether it's a sequel to a 1930/40s 'classic' just as long as it's an enjoyable book and can stand by itself. So I deliberately didn't reread *The Space Merchants*. Even so, and though I last read the book many years ago, it is a classic and I did remember the general plot, also as I read this book details for *The Space Merchants* kept being dredged from my memory.

The setting for the story is an Earth effectively run by advertising agencies, all current political systems have been swamped by a rampant capitalism, the only reason it is to produce and consume. Nothing can stand in the way of this and the result is a world of new natural resources and heavy pollution. Conservation is the dirtiest word.

Venus is the home of the conservationists, a planet they are gradually terraforming. A planet they have escaped to avoid Earth's society (see *The Space Merchants*). It's also a useful place for Earth to send its misfits and criminals.

Our hero, Tension Tarb, wordsmith star class and our heroine, Mitzi Ku, 'a brassy blonde' are doing a year of diplomatic duty on Venus. Their real job is to recruit spies and saboteurs to keep the Venusian economy off balance.

Just before Tarb is due to return to Earth he and Mitzi are injured in an 'accident', she severely. The journey back to Earth is a slow one, a year of suspended animation is used. When Tarb wakes he is surprised to find Mitzi has also returned cutting short her tour of duty. Also she has almost recovered from her injuries and has several million dollars from an out of court settlement for the accident. Tarb is (justifiably) peeved that he has been out of this settlement.

Within hours of his arrival on Earth Tarb has fallen foul of a new advertising technique and has a 'Campbellian addiction' (this doesn't mean he has to keep reading old *Analog*/*Asimov*). He has been programmed to need Moke-Koke, a 'refreshing, taste-tingling blend of the finest chocolate-type flavouring, synthetic coffee extract and selected cocaine analogues'.

We then follow Tarb's declining fortunes. Although they do oscillate, fate always deals a blow to any improvements and the general trend is very definitely down. He descends from top ad agency to military service (civilising a group of abos) and then gourmet maker and the horrors of being a consumer. We also see the Moke addiction developing and his relationship with Mitzi going sour.

Mitzi has changed since her return to Earth. Whilst she is now a stake holder with the ad agency her attitudes don't fit the norm for such an exalted rank. You should have worked out the reason for this no later than page 80 after her date with Tarb.

The central theme, as the book's title tells us, is the conflict between the societies of Earth and Venus, a conflict into which Tarb is sucked and which he eventually provides the first step to solving. Again you should be able to work out how he does this long before he does (or is that just me remembering *The Space Merchants*?).

This book is a satire, Pohl and the

blur writer tell us this but whereas *The Space Merchants* (and stories with a related theme by Pohl written around the same time) were putting forward new ideas, new series, about advertising and the consumer society - we are now all well versed in these. Those fantastic ideas are now unfortunate facts, even the exaggerations of the *Merchants' War* no longer seem that far-fetched. Having said that, Pohl does get in a few nice digs at the extremists on both sides but I'll let you read them in context.

As for the writing, well Pohl has been doing it for a long time and this is straight-forward, fast-paced, readable prose - a major accomplishment these days (and if I think about it probably anytime). The first person viewpoint is used to help the reader identify with the hero because this is certainly a book where we're supposed to do that. In fact in some ways it has a style that is reminiscent of the days of *The Space Merchants* but more accomplished.

In conclusion, I enjoyed the book, I read it quickly (though that's probably because it's slimmer than most novels these days - and that's probably another plus point). But I didn't enjoy it as much as I'd hoped, it doesn't have the impact of *The Space Merchants*. Whilst it danced like a butterfly it didn't sting like a bee.

#### DIMON IN THE SKULL - Frederik Pohl

[Penguin, 1985, 165pp, £1.95]

Reviewed by Keith Freeman

THE BLURB TELLS US THAT THIS IS an 'updated version of *A Plague of Pythons* (1965) so be warned if you've read it before - you'll get that deja-vu feeling! The plot is hardly original - a small group take over control of the Earth's population; this time it's by means of an electronic device. The story implies, works in the 'subliminal' band of the shortwave spectrum. With this device the user can 'possess' people - i.e., control their bodies totally. Some play is made of the fact that anyone using the device (which is worn around the head and described as a 'coronet of silver spikes') cannot themselves be possessed - but, other than this, shielding is ignored.

The start is fairly slow, showing the effects of the possession without revealing who (or how) - the pace seems to grow once the hero comes into contact with the group, but this is nearly half-way through the book. The early part was spoilt, for me, by a glaring inconsistency: page 26 'He had a blurry memory of being thrown into an empty boxcar...' followed on page 28 by 'He had chosen this train with care'. An idea, no matter how ridiculous (almost) can be described as the premise for a story; the story's internal logic should be preserved.

So we come to the end of the story - and a twist that was hardly unexpected (though its lack of resolve has a certain plausibility). Not the brilliant story the blurb promises but a competently crafted book to while away a summer's day or two.

#### PEACE - Gene Wolfe

[Chatto, 1985, 264pp, £3.95]

Reviewed by Mary Gentle

SOMEWHERE TOWARDS THE BEGINNING OF THIS novel, the narrator mentions 'a confusion that, though charming, was nearly impenetrable'. Well, yes. That is *Peace*. Whether it's a good novel, I don't know: I do know that it requires about three times the amount of work that a reader would averagely put in.

*Peace* is Modernist in style. The

narrator, Alden Dennis Wear, is the novel; all is seen through his mind. It's an associational story, everything reminds him of everything else; both small and significant events are given the same emphasis - almost a child's-eye view, but this is no child, it's a man, a doctor, or after a stroke, wandering through his retrospective life.

I would understand this book a whole lot better if I were conversant with the finer details of Christianity, and specifically Catholicism. Alden may be damned, and may be saved, and may be in purgatory - but I don't know enough about these states to tell. In *Peace*, is the only possible afterlife a wandering through the life we have already made, seeing it without illusion? That could be a definition of hell. When Alden seeks advice from a long-dead doctor, what Judgement is it that he awaits? - Doctor Van Ness, in the realms of imagination or death, asks him to take 'a test with mirrors', and these - scenes from Alden's life - are mirrors in which he sees himself precisely and exactly as he is. And is it Alden who judges, or another?

*Peace*'s other title might be 'The Book that Blinds the Dead'. But *Peace* is one theme, wound in with a theme on the nature of tales, and one about the influence of the past; and what it comes down to is, what is real? Alden is trying to find that out, and since 'a man is only the bundle of his relations, a knob of roots', he must travel back and tell the stories of his aunt Olivia (who raised him) and her four suitors, three of whom are figured in an enclosed folktale, and one - the victorious - in modern commercial capitalism. And of Cainsville, and the other people that surrounded him as a child, whose memories go back into history and myth. Interlocking: they themselves tell stories, of weird tales, and old pagan religions, and fables that demonstrate the impossibility of telling, firstly, what is evil; and lastly, are evil things necessary?

Alden may be a necessary evil. By the end of the book, he has destroyed much of the pattern of life in Cainsville. That's ironic, for a man who always harmed the living in favour of the dead and the past. But necessary? That depends on whether one believes that the contingent world is the only world.

Rooted in metaphysics it may be, but the tale told is of material things - the kind of objects found in a life: a boy's scout-knife, an ivory egg painted with Biblical scenes, a silver dollar, a ceramic Chinese headrest. All are to be seen, all show people manipulating people. 'All of us do real harm', Alden accepts, somewhere.

I say 'somewhere' because chronological order is difficult to trace. Like memory itself, the narrative darts back and forward, stories are begun in one place by one person, only to be finished off later by someone different: the seller of fake books, the dead doctor, the Dog Boy. Which is rather more realistic than straightforward 'realist' novels, but runs the risk that some people do - of giving the reader the impression of being trapped in a corner by a scrupulous bore. *Peace* isn't boring. But it is slow. This is 'peace' as in 'rest in'.

Alden and *Peace* are obsessed with the past, a past that is at worst fake, at best unreliable. This is closely bound in with tales, and how they change. The landscape of folklore is left desolate now, we move from stories of princesses in towers to stories of how fake orange juice is processed and packed. To begin with, nothing was real, but it was numinous - the New World, the unbounded imagination. Now everything is fake and tacky. Alden is a user, of people, and of natural resources.

The alchemist's gold, found, proves false.

Some illustrations: Alden discovers a seller of fake books, who creates 'old books' that never existed. However, one of these forgeries is a book that has existed for ten centuries, that 'Book That Blinds the Dead' whose Greek title was coined by, as Wolfe says, 'a providential gentleman'. So what's real? Another of these fake books sends Alden, and a woman he might have married, after a fake treasure - but it exposes the real greed and treachery present in both people. So what's real?

*Peace* is full of glass and mirrors; seeing through glass to the past; the self reflected in mirrors. There are transformations, and tall tales. There are temporal shifts in the space of one paragraph, maybe one sentence. If the novel form wasn't intrinsically linear, Wolfe would have written a tale in which all events happen and exist simultaneously. To put it another way, *Peace* is the back of the tapestry: a tangle of coloured threads that only imply a pattern. The story from inside. There is an 'outside' story - how Alden as a child injured another boy, was brought up by his aunt while his parents went to Europe; how his aunt married Julius Smart, who founded the factory that changed the town that became an inheritance that shaped a life that created the 'house' that Alden built.

But that story takes some close reading to get at. It comes in asides, and brief mentions, and throw-away paragraphs; and meanwhile tallmians and magical tales distract the reader, like coloured scarves thrown up by a conjuror.

I'm still not sure I've seen through the trick.

**FREE LIVE FREE** - Gene Wolfe  
(Gollancz, 1985, 399pp, \$9.95)  
Reviewed by Paul Kincaid

## FREE LIVE FREE A FANTASY GENE WOLFE



**GENE WOLFE IS NOT REALLY A NOVELIST**, despite evidence to the contrary. His greatest works, like *Peace* and *The Book of the New Sun*, are really at heart concatenations of tales strung together on often slender threads of narrative. *Free Live Free*, unusually, is a novel, but even here there is the tone of a crackerbarrel philosopher sitting outside a store and entertaining his cronies with stories, the

taller the better.

Ben Free occupies a ramshackle old house in a poor part of the city about to be pulled down to make way for a freeway. He has four ill-assorted lodgers, paying no rent: Stubb is short, short-sighted, and an odd sort of work-pride fanatic; Candy Garth is a compulsive eater, immensely fat, and a prostitute; Ozie Barnes is a slick but not very good salesman forever believing his ship is about to come in; and Madame Serpentina is a sinuous, beautiful, mysterious gypsy with strange occult powers. The four find unexpected common cause fighting to save the house, and for a while a variety of hilarious stratagems prove remarkably effective, but in the end the house is destroyed.

And Ben Free disappears.

Free had given his four lodgers vague hints of a lost treasure, and now with nothing between them but a hotel room they decide to search for Free and his treasure. The bulk of the novel is taken up with this idiosyncratic quest, which proceeds by happenstance as much as by plan. The treasure they do find at the end, indeed the Ben Free they find, is not at all what they expect; but it would be unfair to say that is the subtlest and in some ways the most effective part of the book to reveal more than that.

*Free Live Free* describes itself as 'A Fantasy', but in many ways that is the smallest part of the book. It is a thriller in which the four face many tense and dramatic moments as a paranoid policeman and strange and impersonal forces are ranged against them. And it is what I suppose must be called a novel of characters, though that seems a somewhat inadequate description for this wild and vivacious book. The characters, even the least of them, are rich and colourful and leap straight from the page; but there are no ordinary people here, every last one of them is larger than life. There are the four, of course, each individual and human yet unbelievable - not that believability is one of the strengths or even intents of this book. Plot developments are anarchic, full of coincidence and the *deus ex machina*, often ludicrous if you are to regard them strictly in terms of likelihood; but if you were so to regard them you would miss the immeasurable joys of the book. And around the four central characters are a cast of lesser actors every bit as outrageous and vivid as they are. The policeman Proudly who is convinced that Free's tenants are part of an elaborate plot to take over the world; Mrs. Baker, the neighbour, whose every utterance is a malapropism; and Free himself, a real chameleon of a character.

Over and above all this, however, *Free Live Free* is a comedy. It's full of moments which are treated with a straight face, but which you have to laugh at. And there are episodes of pure farce. In the middle of the novel, for instance, is an extended set piece in which the four separately come to the mental hospital of Belmont and find themselves being considered as inmates. There are some conversations during this episode in which the cross purposes grow increasingly wild and lunatic like something out of Thorne Smith.

Wolfe's command of language, the sumptuous clarity of his writing, is something one has come to expect. Nor is his skill at characterisation or his ability to paint a scene particularly unexpected. But I must confess myself surprised and delighted by this talent for farce, and also by his control of the changes of mood and tempo.

This is not his best book, but I think it is one I shall long regard with a particular joy and affection.

## TEAR ALONG THE ROTTED SPINE

by Ian Pemble

Though perhaps not best known for its coverage of Science Fiction/Fantasy, *Knave* magazine has in the last year published interviews with Harry Harrison and Frank Herbert, both by Neil Gaiman. It's also carried *The Dragon-Hiker's Guide to Battledfield Covenant* at *Dune's Edge*—*Odyssey Two*, based on a *Scienc* address by David Langford, another regular contributor to *Knave*, as is Paul Barnett (aka John Grant, aka Eve Devereux, aka Bilk).

BY AND LARGE IT'S NOT A BAD LITTLE NUMBER, THIS EDITING BUSINESS except for all the reading you have to do. Manuscripts and things. Mostly things. Some of them quite dreadfully written. And this all enforced reading has an unfortunate effect on my private reading habits.

Take newspapers for example — I no longer do. I once worked for an 'off-Fleet Street' photo agency (which put me off Fleet Street for life), and as part of the job, had to read virtually every national newspaper, every day. The only one I don't have to read was *The Guardian*. This is now the only paper I do read.

So you see the job carries its own aversion therapy, which carries over into those precious moments when a good book may be happily curled up with. I like escapist fantasy, something easy on the brain cells. Absorbing without being too challenging, exciting without being likely to keep me awake all night. *Shard & Sorcery* for preference. And with the vast number of authors/titles in the field these days, I should be a happy man. I am not. I am 'disgusted of London'.

Recently I finally finished reading *The War of Powers* by Robert E. Vardeman and Victor Milan. Then I hurled it, along with a few cursors, across the room. Conned again!

The book is in three parts, but in one volume. Each part is dedicated, in traditional fashion, to the authors' families and friends and/or pets. The second and third parts begin with resumes of the preceding action and it becomes increasingly obvious that they were originally meant to have been published separately. However the nice publisher has decided to save us all a lot of time and trouble and publish them as a three-in-one complete adventure!

## WOTC.

The brave (but tardy) Post Longstrider arrives at the last page, only to find that the beautiful (but dispossessed) Princess Moriana has buggered off in search of further amusements in further and no doubt interminable volumes. "I shall follow!" cries the besotted Post in the last line. He might. I won't.

This is not an isolated example — it's a deplorable trend. Another book I wish I'd never started is *Peregrine Primus* by Avram Davidson. On the last page he gets his hero out of an impossible situation by turning him into a peregrine falcon so he can fly out of danger! I suppose I should have realised that any

book with 'primus' in the title was bound to be a pot boiler.

Far better writers are guilty of stretching a point and making it into a series. Take Julian May's *Many Coloured Land* epic. At the beginning of the second volume she stretches and introduces some entirely new characters to the story in the first volume, so she can continue on into a third...and so on. In fact I enjoyed the series, so I suppose she got away with it — but only just.

An even more glaring example of a writer starting a book without knowing how the story will finish, must be Philip Jose Farmer's *Barren* series. The second volume she stretches and introduces some entirely new characters to the story in the first volume, so she can continue on into a third...and so on. In fact I enjoyed the series, so I suppose she got away with it — but only just.

I must admit that this 'into the unknown' approach can sometimes work with some of the better writers. Roger Zelazny's *Number* series, for instance. I strongly suspect he had to write himself out of a few corners along the way, but he managed to sustain the pace and interest all the way to a satisfying conclusion — a rare and wonderful thing.

With lesser writers I suspect baser motives — aided and abetted by their publishers. The publishers are actually the worst offenders. I can just about stomach the way writers string out their stories, volume after infuriating volume, in the hope that the faithful fans will stick with them to the bitter end. More fool they — meaning me in most cases. But I hate the way publishers fail to indicate on the jacket that the book in your hot little hand will build up your hopes of a satisfying denouement — only to leave you stranded. Even when they do bother to mention that this is Volume III of *The Revenge of the Runefolk* they absolutely fail to indicate that the *Runefolk* and all its works will be good for another dozen volumes of limping prose, long after you've finished this one.

What can I do? I utterly refuse to read the last couple of pages of any book I intend to buy, just to make sure. I'd no sooner watch the BBC's *Nine O'Clock News* when ITV were going to show recorded highlights of a football match at 10.30.

Though, I'm sure there are many of you with many other examples of your own. All I ask is a return to the good old days when you could be reasonably sure that any book you bought would have a beginning, a middle and an end. Not necessarily in that order — see Zelazny. But definitely an end.

Sir Winston Churchill, who needs no introduction from etc., once wrote: 'This is the kind of writing up with which I will not put.' I was referring to dangling participles, but the sentiment mine was when we were dangling again as concerned.

So what can we do about it? Well, we can complain. I've now thrown my copy of *The War of Powers* away and am reluctant to spend good money on another. But the next book I find guilty of blatant dangling will be torn in half (along the spine, it's easier) and posted off to the offending parties: half for the publisher, half for the writer(s). Care to join me? If enough of us return their shoddy merchandise, dismissed and dismembered, the powers that publish might even be moved to contrition.

Ian Pemble is the editor of *Knave* magazine.

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## LETTERS/continued

INTERESTING COVER — IF A BIT TECHNICAL-LOOKING, MUCH MORE professional inside than last issue. I liked the page numbers a lot. Nice pictures and cartoons.

I found your editorial a bit hard to follow — tho' I liked your opening paragraph. I think it was because the points you were making seemed to vary, e.g. Paul Herdcastle's quote isn't about the war, but about people's attitudes to the soldiers once they'd lost the war. Maybe I missed the point.

BARBARA H. DAVIES  
4 Murchugh Close  
Cheltenham  
Glos.

Other comments on the 'new look' *Vector* came from:

DAVID WINGBORE: 'Vector 127 looks marvellous. Excellent design work. Good editorial, too. I even sang along with the epigram!'

DAVID LANGFORD: 'The new *Vector* looks nice. Somebody's been doing an awful lot of LaTeX work there...'

COLIN GREENLAND: 'Russain M. has made *Vector* look like a magazine! No doubt you'll have people writing in grouching about the lack of duplicator smears, wobbly margins, etc, but I'm all for it.'

— Thanks for the praise: but all letters, favourable or unfavourable, are welcome.