VECTOR 129

The critical journal of the British Science Fiction Association

75P

DECEMBER 1985 / JANUARY 1986

A·L·D·I·S·S

INTERVIEWED BY Paul Kincaid

Plus READERS' LETTERS and BOOK REVIEWS

VECTOR

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DECEMBER 1985/JANUARY 1986

C O N T E N T S

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THE BSFA: The British Science Fiction Association is an amateur organization, formed in 1958, which aims to promote and encourage the reading, writing, and publishing of science fiction in all its forms. We publish Vector, a bimonthly critical journal; Matrix, a bimonthly newsletter/magazine; Focus, a biannual forum for writers, and Paperback Inferno, a review magazine of the latest paperbacks. Other services include Orbiter, a postal SF writers' workshop, an SF Information Service, a postal Magazine Chain and an SF Lending Library. Membership costs £7.00 per year. For details, write to: Sandy Brown, 18 Gordon Terrace, Blantyre, Lanarkshire, G72 9NA or if you live in the USA: Cy Chauvin, 14248 Wilfred, Detroit, Michigan 48213, USA.

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EDITORIAL

DAVID V BARRETT

1985 HAS BEEN A YEAR OF CHANGE IN THE BSFA. No bloodless (or bloody) coups, but **Vector**, **Matrix** and **PI** have all changed their editorial teams, **Focus** appears to be in the process of doing so, our Chairman has resigned due to pressure of other commitments, and we now have a new Company Secretary and a Business Manager (subject to AGM approval).

Letters to **Matrix** over this time have sometimes expressed concern over the content and production of the magazines, and over the way the BSFA is run. I hope that members will agree that the magazines are improving, but a few other points are worth making:

* All work done for the BSFA (with the exception of the commercial printing of **Vector**) is voluntary and amateur. Voluntary means we do it because we want to; amateur means we do it for love, not for money. Amateur doesn't mean low-quality, though too often the words are seen as synonymous.

* We aim for a professional standard, but if we do fall below that standard, we ought to be told. You pay for the magazines; you have the right to criticise. (For all letters, please note that I now have an address!)

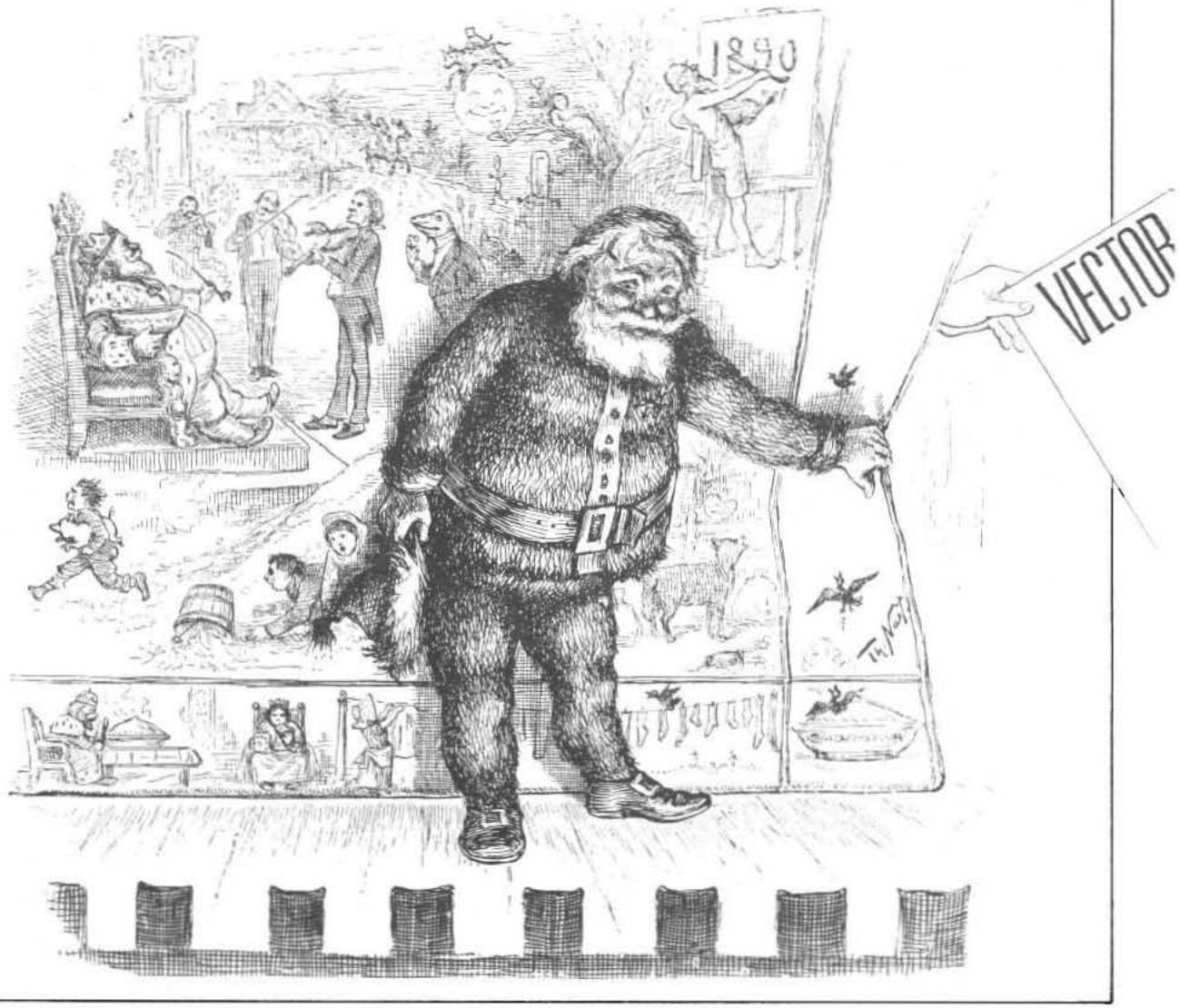
* BSFA membership is constantly changing. We hope that by producing quality magazines we can reduce the leaving rate and increase the joining rate, making the BSFA both stronger and more financially viable.

* By careful economising we have managed to keep membership dues and the cover prices of the magazines at 1981 levels. But we are now only just breaking even. It is likely that next spring we will have to raise prices, but hopefully not by as much as inflation. **You can help** by encouraging a friend or colleague to join; who do you know who is into SF, but is not in the BSFA?

* You can also help by contributing articles or artwork to **Vector**. Short fillers related to SF (up to 800 words) are always welcome; if you have ideas for something longer, drop me a line so that we can discuss it - or, if you prefer, submit it on spec.

This issue's pre-publication crises have included Hussain preparing to move home, me moving home and our most drastic excuse so far, Ann being rushed into hospital for an emergency appendectomy, after which, against all protests she chained herself to her word-processor to get this issue typed up.

So... a merry whatsit and a happy thingumajig. And I look forward to your giving my postman shoulder strain in 1986.



LETTERS

Dangerous Divisions

A final response to Mary Gentle's discussion of the "Power Of The Pagan" in C.S.Lewis's Narnia books, extracted from a very long and thoughtful letter:

MARY COMMENTS THAT "NINETY PER CENT OF CHRISTIANITY IS PLATONISM or neo-Platonism". She qualifies this argument by addressing the viewpoint that, in brief summary, says "the Pagan prefigures Christianity, but the latter prefigures the former". What I disagree with is the idea that, because something resembles something else or can be represented or explained in other terms, the thing itself is therefore "lesser" and devalued. The idea creeps into many discussions about Christianity and its relationships to other religions without actually being recognised as such. Because of this difficulty, perhaps an illustration (provided by Lewis himself in **The Silver Chair**) will serve to clarify my point.

In the children's and Puddlegum's final encounter with the Green Witch, when they free Prince Rillian from the silver chair, the witch tries to enchant them into believing that the world they've known above ground (Narnia) is a figment of their imaginations. Every time they try to cling to a particular memory, the witch re-interprets it with reference to her underworld. For example, the sun: the witch pretends she doesn't understand what the sun is, the children explain that it's like a lamp, and the witch replies: "You see? When you try to think clearly what this sun must be, you cannot tell me. You can only tell me it is like the lamp. Your sun is a dream; and there is nothing in that dream that was not copied from the lamp. The lamp is the real thing; the sun is but a tale, a children's story". She goes on to give Aslan the same treatment when the children say that a lion is, in fact, like a cat. In pursuing this argument I can see I'm stepping into another firing line, namely the pre-eminence of Christianity over other religious traditions ....

Let me return to the character of Aslan. In the end any view of religion - or for that matter literature - is the result of our own personal response to it: we all bring our prejudices, whether they be "secular liberal humanist" (a phrase Mary described herself with in her review of LeGuin's **A Compass Rose** in Vector 115) or for that matter Christian. If you like I'm challenging our ability to be objective in this area anyway. The character of Aslan, I would hold, is the key to the power of the Narnia books. Remove him, and I challenge anyone to argue that the result would be in any way satisfying, even at the least profound level of the books. Now Aslan is supposed to represent the person of Christ as he might appear in a world other than our own, but as Mary rightly pointed out, the places where there is one-to-one correspondence are actually few and far between, and even these cannot be wholly divorced from Pagan influences. What are we then left with? A Pagan god in the form of a lion? Or perhaps the real character of Christ? You see, Jesus is described as the Lion of Judah in Rev. 5:5, and this image is part of a description of Christ which is far from the "Pale Galilean".

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CHRIS PRIEST'S **ALBION** WRIT WAS MOST INTERESTING. PRIEST'S ARTICles usually have an openness, an honesty to them which should be appreciated even if one doesn't agree with everything he says. In this case, I'll only take issue with one thing - characterisation (that's not to say I agree with everything else he says). I would not claim to be a student of the history of literature or to have read a large cross-section of the literature of the ages but I've read enough to know there are few immutable standards but many passing fashions. Criticism is based on these fashions as much as standards. Whilst I like my stories to contain well-rounded characters, many people don't seem to care and they're just as right as me in what they consider good stories. But good, well-rounded characters aren't enough to produce a good story. A good story is a combination of factors, all important, all to be balanced. The style and purpose of a story also dictate its formulation. I don't want to belabour this, but I do feel strongly that the essence of art is variety and change. Indeed, any attempt to define a framework, a critical standard, at best limits that art and at worst is a form of censorship.

I must take issue with Mark Greener's review. I didn't think much of Asimov's **The Gods Themselves** either and I agree with many of Mark's criticisms, but to condemn all hard SF of the early 1970s because of this and the Clarke book is ridiculous - talk about sweeping generalisations! Further, to say **Gods** came after the **New Wave** and thus should have taken account of "the different critical standards that availed as a result" is daft. First, British and American New Waves were very different. Even the Americans who published in 'New Worlds' were, on the whole, very different from the British stories; compare Spinrad's **Bug Jack Barron** or Ellison's **A Boy And His Dog** or Zelazny's **In The House Of The Dead** with Aldiss's **Barefoot In The Head** or any Jerry Cornelius story. British New Wave seems to have had little effect beyond the circle of authors involved and the same is probably true of US New Wave - they were both fashions of their time, fashions that have now passed. Whether either **New Wave** had much effect on critical 'standards' is an interesting question, but these so-called 'standards' are only fashions. Even putting this aside, I am worried by the suggestion that any author should tailor his/her work to meet some critic's standards; this is just

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another facet of writing for a particular audience/market.

Finally, when there is much in the book which could be criticised but which isn't, it seems a waste of time to criticise Asimov for missing chances to be allegorical when this was never his purpose; perhaps we should criticise Shakespeare for missing the chance for a few good jokes in **King Lear**. Perhaps I'm being over-hard on Mark Greener but reviews should be logical and any facts called up should be correct.

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THE LAYOUT AND GRAPHICS OF **VECTOR 127** ARE TOO GOOD TO GO UNnoted. I assume the new Production Editor, Hussain R. Mohamed, is responsible? Very classy, and very well executed. I usually disparage ambitious graphics in fanzines for the same reason I peer suspiciously at amateur fiction: it's not centrally relevant to what fanzines are about, and anyone who can do it well isn't likely to be doing it in a fanzine. Thus most of the Graphics Tours de Force, like most amateur short stories found in fanzines are rather sad, particularly to anyone who knows anything about how type and layout work. Well, Mr Mohamed certainly knows how these things work, and in fact appears to have that rare thing: a sense of layout humour, as evidenced by touches such as the engravings (eagle and flags, 'presenting' hands) around the Haldeman interview, or (my favourite) the Gilliland Britannia under the Albion Writ heading.

As with any good piece of art, though, one glaring imperfection remains. I refer, of course, to the missing apostrophe in the half-inch-high heading saying 'READERS LETTERS'. A touch of the old **Vector** just for continuity? Aside from all that, the magazine now looks like its been within spitting distance of a blue pencil or two. Still some kinks, but all in all it brought back memories of the Kevin Smith **Vector** - the publication which made me think for the first time that the BSFA might be worth joining. Do keep it up.

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I'M AFRAID I CAN'T QUITE SEE WHAT L.J. HURST IS GETTING AT (IN 'The Face Of The Robots'). Of course Asimov is inconsistent in his 'series' of robot stories. I imagine that back in the '40s he was churning them out whenever he got an idea, using a common background and characters because it saved time and effort. I don't think it matters; it is the central idea in the stories that makes them a pleasure to read, not whether each and every fact agrees with the previous or subsequent stories. Are all Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes stories consistent? After all he had a much easier task writing about his own period. In fact, I think that Asimov's more recent works (**Foundation's Edge** and **The Robots Of Dawn**) are less interesting and slightly boring because he does waste time making the stories consistent with the originals while allowing for the changes that have taken place in the 30 or so years since he wrote them.

Hurst seems to pick on tiny and irrelevant points. For instance, Elijah Baley's hat, which Hurst finds incongruous. Perhaps it is, but society is full of such anachronisms. Why do women buy fur coats when animal skins are no longer necessary to keep warm; why do most men still wear ties with their work clothes? Little things like this get stuck in society long after their purpose has been forgotten. The mass agoraphobia in the Baley stories is central to the plot and is perhaps unlikely, but is it impossible? I am sure modern 'civilised' society has its neuroses of which we are practically unaware. For instance, what proportion of the British population could now slaughter an animal for meat, hide, etc. without feeling squeamish, yet once upon a time it was an everyday chore.

Concerning the accuracy of Asimov's vision of robots, he suffers from the problem of all hard SF writers. The reality of technology catches up all too fast, but often on a different and diverging track. The same is true of Arthur C. Clarke's vision of space exploration and the technology in H.G. Wells' **When The Sleeper Wakes** from an earlier era which I commented on in an article in **Matrix** some years back. All SF writers have limited imaginations, albeit more than mainstream authors, but new ideas are few and far between. The skill of an SF writer is in packaging an old idea in an original story which leads to a suspension of belief and that wonderful joy of escaping from a humdrum existence, whether in the style of an Asimov or Aldiss, a Ballard or Brunner.

No, I'll forgive Isaac his inconsistencies, his cardboard characters and his egoism because for me at least, years ago his stories lived in my dreams and still give me a feeling of nostalgia. Still thankyou L.J. Hurst for a stimulating article and thank you David for an interesting edition of **Vector**.

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I LIKE THE IDEA OF AN OPINION COLUMN, WHICH IF I RECALL WAS started then dropped a while ago. Ian Pemble talks about trilogies and asks why they are published - the answer is the same as for the journal which he used to edit: because it's what people buy - and that isn't the same reason as because it's what the publishers offer them.

The fact is, however, that all these trilogies are only the same length that single novels used to be: it's just that with the maps, list of characters, long chapter headings, appendices, illustrations and menus they seem longer. The coming trend, by the way, is for songs - more and more books will have words and music printed in them. Honest - I'm not kidding.

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I READ YOUR EDITORIAL TO **VECTOR 128** WITH INTEREST, AND BROADLY agree with your conclusions. However, you are guilty of some over-simplifications, which only serve to weaken your argument. Your remarks about Ray Honeyford are particularly misleading. For one thing, his remarks were made in **The Salisbury Review**, a journal which is not known for its contributions to racial harmony; it is hard to believe that anyone without racist views would be connected with this journal, even as a freelance contributor. As for the actual views expressed: there are many educational experts who would disagree with them. There is every reason to suppose that children, of whatever race, benefit greatly from a multi-cultural education, especially in a multicultural society. To separate children in racial groups for their education is a monstrous suggestion which could only result in damaging race relations in this country. Take a look at South Africa if you don't believe me.

On a less serious matter: I uphold your right to coat your lungs in noxious black tar, and do not think you disgusting for wanting to do so. However, the dangers and discomforts of passive smoking are very real; slow suicide might be your idea of fun, but I fail to see why you should drag others along with you.

As for the relevance of all this to science fiction; mine may not be a popular view, but I'm not sure that science fiction is (necessarily) in the business of speculating on possible future ethical views. More often than not, SF is really concerned about today - which is why it is relevant. Even in cases where different ethical systems are examined, then this exploration is only really valid if it has something to tell us about ourselves and our own values. Not that I'm making a dogmatic statement.

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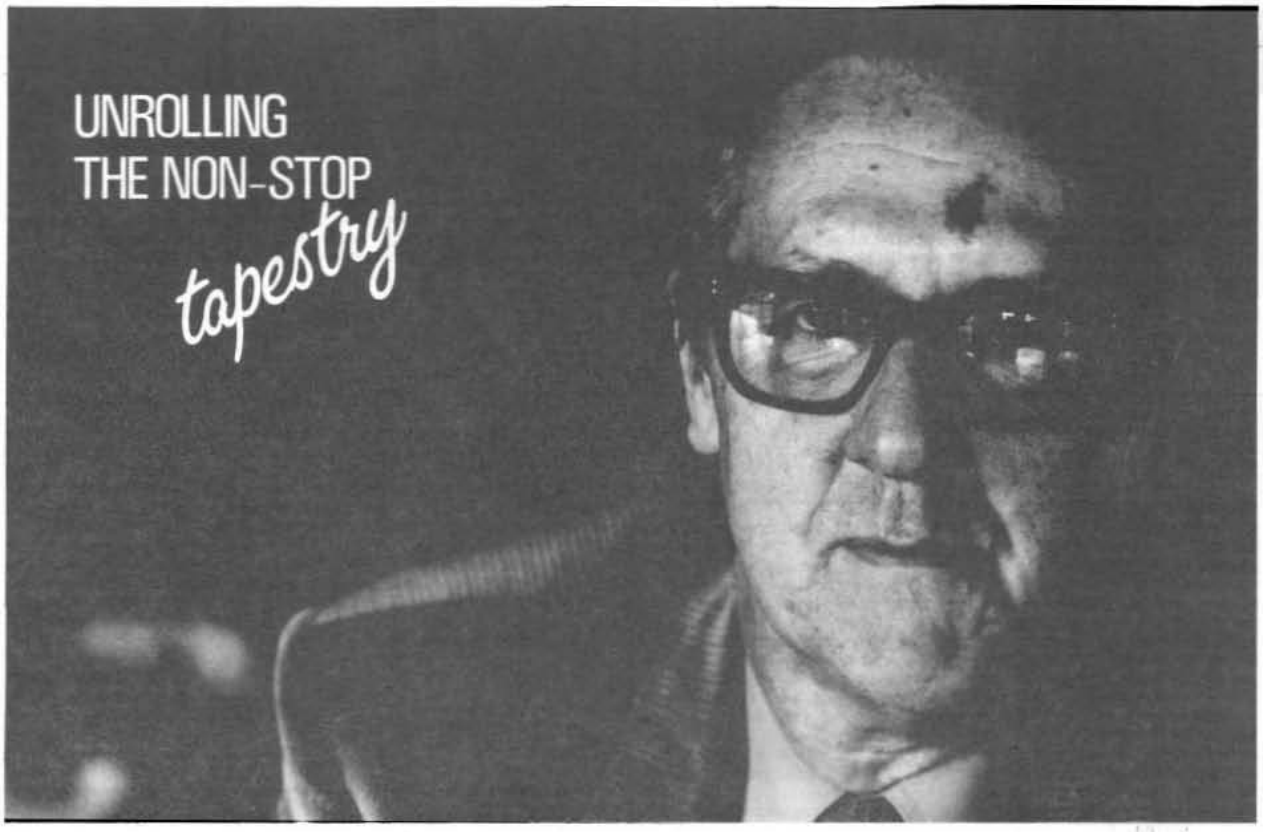
[I don't necessarily disagree with any of that, Steven. But, of course, looking at future ethical values can help us to step to one side and view today's values from a different angle. On Honeyford: he is actually liked and respected by his colleagues and pupils; he's obviously not an ogre. From what I've heard of what he said, rather than what other people have said he said (and there's a significant difference between the two), I don't think he's a racist either. He has a different viewpoint and a different preferred approach from what is currently fashionable - the present consensus belief. He might be right or wrong - but that's irrelevant to my point: those who screamed 'racist' refused him the basic human right to explain his views, at a public meeting to which he had been invited to do just that. And that's a form of mob censorship and arrogance I find just as indefensible and repugnant as racism - Ed]

Other letters held over until **Vector 130**

UNROLLING THE NON-STOP *tapestry*



TOM MILLER / JONATHAN CAPE

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BRIAN ALDISS

Interviewed by PAUL KINCAID

KINCAID: The first book you published was **The Brightfount Diaries** about bookselling. Were you working in a bookshop at the time?

ALDISS: Yes. I knew I wanted to be a writer, but I didn't really want to do the starvation in a garret bit, so I picked a job that paid starvation wages. But I got a lot of fun out of it, and started contributing a column to the newspaper of the book trade, 'The Bookseller'. It proved very popular because it was the one bit that was funny; all the rest was rather stodgy. So I did collect a very good readership among publishers and booksellers, and eventually I got a letter from Faber saying: Have you ever thought of turning 'The Brightfount Diaries' into a book? Well, of course, I'd thought of nothing else, and it was very easy to do. The funny thing was that within the next three or four months I had six other offers, the same sort of offer.

KINCAID: It must have been a very nice start to a career.

ALDISS: It spoils you for ever, no rejection slips. I forget who it was, Collins, Michael Joseph, Gollancz, Heinemann, quite eminent publishers all wanted to do it. But I was fortunate that it was Faber who came in first of all because they did a very good job, they were friendly and helpful. And even more astonishing, the thing got good reviews and sold.

KINCAID: Weren't you tempted, therefore, to do more of the same instead of going into science fiction? Was that something you'd always wanted to do?

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ALDISS: Since I was a child I'd always loved social comedy and I'd always loved science fiction. I didn't see why one couldn't do them both. If you like them both, then they're not antithetical, they're both at home in you. I think, for a while, with things like **The Primal Urge** and **The Male Response** I was looking for a way in which they could be combined. I guess they can be combined, but I had difficulty with those books. Now I'm known I think I would have less difficulty; also I might write them better.

KINCAID: These days science fiction has considerably better critical response than it had in those days. What sort of response did you get when you suddenly produced science fiction?

ALDISS: Well, first there was the response from Faber. When they asked me what I was going to do for an encore I said: Well, er, um, I want to write science fiction. Oh good, they said, great, we're all science fiction fans. That was quite extraordinary in the mid-50's. It was the one publishing house where they genuinely read and liked science fiction. That was Charles Mentieth, Sir Geoffrey Faber, his daughter Ann, and several of the other people there.

Actually Charles Mentieth had been a friend, when he was at Oxford, of Kingsley Amis and Edmund Crispin, so it was very much in the bloodstream. He used to subscribe to 'Astounding' and this sort of thing. I believe Ann Faber had actually written a science fiction novel of a sort.

They had just started publishing Crispin's Best Of SF anthologies, which grew out of a series Faber did which I used to collect as a boy: **My Best Ghost Story**, **My Best Sporting Story**, etc, etc. A whole series they did, and when they went onto Best SF it took off. It was tremendously successful because Crispin had the whole field to draw from. I think Crispin set the standard. He was slightly conservative in his taste, but they were well chosen. I used him as a model when I came to do the Penguin SF. We used to have battles, seeing who could get to the William Tenn story that you wanted before the other one did.

So Faber had done that, and I think they had done a Simak or two. I used to read for Fabers, and the first Simak collection, **Aliens For Neighbours**, was actually my title. I was very proud of that, a title that I felt signified what Simak was doing at the time.

So the publishing response was very fair. Then there was the difficulty of getting science fiction into the bookshops. But there again I was fortunate. I was forgiven by the booksellers for writing something as peculiar as science fiction because I'd written about bookshops. So they said: Oh, well, Aldiss, he did **The Brightfount Diaries**, we'll have a couple.

So the first fruits were **Non-Stop**, then **Space, Time and Nathaniel**; and they did actually sell quite well, at a time when really there was little science fiction being sold or published. Because in the early 50's there had been a collapse among a lot of publishers who didn't know what they were doing. Heinemann, for instance, had a list with **The Space Merchants**, and they were remaindered because they were so badly packaged, and the reps didn't know what they were selling.

But when Faber went into it they actually did know what they were doing, and they managed to enthuse the reps, which is part of the game. So the reception there was all right.

It was when you tried to sell to paperback there was the difficulty, which was paradoxical.

KINCAID: Yes, I would have thought it was a paperback genre.

ALDISS: They knew the names of Ray Bradbury, Arthur Clarke and A.E. Van Vogt, and that was about all. It took a long time to find a paperback firm who'd publish **Non-Stop**. Eventually it was Digit up in Manchester, for a £62 10s advance. One was grateful, of course.

Now that was one set of receptions. But the other, of course, was that directly I'd got myself published I thought: Bloody good, this is what I always wanted. And I handed in my cards at the bookshop. And everyone was against that move.

When your publisher's against it and says you really shouldn't do this, it's suicide; and your agent says you must be mad; and your father says, what a risk, why don't you become a postman, you get a pension then... it has the effect of firming up your intentions. There's a challenge there. And of course your pride is awakened, you're going to make good.

I think at the time - I was married then, my first marriage - I believe that I had about £200 in a Post Office savings bank. I thought, even if I don't sell anything I could exist for a year. That shows you how inflation has gone up. I thought I could support a wife and two kids on that. But I also thought that if the worst came to the worst I could sell Ted Carnell's 'New Worlds' at two guineas a thousand, as he then paid. So it was typical of me, and I think it's characteristic of me now, that I was at once extremely modest and very ambitious. Those two streaks are both in me.

KINCAID: You've been living entirely on your writing ever since?

ALDISS: Absolutely. Although by the end of the year I was broke. I think I'd then got £60 left. I had sold some stories to Carnell. But what I'd done, you see, instead of being solid and serious and doing another **Non-Stop** as it were, - it was so marvelous to be free, to be on holiday - that I wrote these two loony books, **The Male Response** and **The Primal Urge**, Carnell was disgusted by them both, because they had sex in them and treated it with levity. Even homosexuality in Primal Urge. So he didn't like that at all.

KINCAID: That was very boundary-breaking for those days. Science fiction was a completely asexual genre.

ALDISS: And I couldn't see why it should be. The central business of **Primal Urge** - the registers on the forehead that turn red when you're feeling sexual desire - is not an idea that you can actually take any further. This is one difficulty with the book. It's the idea for a short story, it's hard to make a novel. But still, it had fun in its modest way.

I really think **Male Response** was better. That was at a time when African nations were getting their freedom and I thought: Great, they're free of the colonial yoke, they can do their own thing. There wasn't this awful phantom of overpopulation and starvation then, and one thought: They're going to do their own thing now and it'll be good. It's awful to think how those hopes were betrayed. And Nigeria in particular seemed like a very good bet, so I was delighted when I heard through the grapevine that the Nigerians really liked **Male Response** and laughed about it. Equally, when it was banned in South Africa, I knew I was onto a good thing.

KINCAID: Even then you considered your books as important social comment?

ALDISS: It's very hard for science fiction to escape social comment if it's any good at all. Though maybe I've overdone it once or twice.

KINCAID: A lot of hacks can get away without social comment.

ALDISS: Oh you can do, this is true. I wouldn't elevate it to a principle. But I can't see how you can write such science fiction without producing social comment.

But saying that, when you look at **Male Response** you can see it was intended as a lot of fun. It was actually my holiday, you know, and also it was my way of writing secretly about the Far East. I didn't know that part of Africa at all. I just invented it because I had a knowledge of the Far East and was trying to put that behind me and start anew in England.

But as I say, there was this hostile reception from Carnell who, not liking them, couldn't sell them very well. So when a year went by I really was in trouble because they hadn't sold and they had been my major investment. But in the second year when I was clinging on by my toenails, both these novels sold, however ludicrously. One to Galaxy novels and the other to Ballantine. Then **Male Response** was sold to Denis Dobson over here. Faber wouldn't have them. So I was saved by the gang, really.

KINCAID: One of the advantages with SF at the time, I suppose, was the number of outlets for short stories, which allowed a sort of training in the craft. Were there many outlets for short stories other than the SF magazines?

ALDISS: There was a time when I got interested in opening up other markets for science fiction. If you look in the acknowledgments page of **Moment Of Eclipse** you'll find those stories were published all over the place in all kind of odd outlets - 'Punch' is one - various odd places, rather than the SF magazines. But the magazine I really wanted to sell to was the 'Magazine Of Fantasy And Science Fiction', and I found that was quite easy to do because they published all the chunks of **Hothouse**.

KINCAID: Did the award for **Hothouse** actually improve sales?

ALDISS: I'm not sure whether it increases sales to the public, but it firms up publishers. If they can stick a banner over it saying 'Hugo Winner' or 'Nebula Winner', it encourages the publisher. And that's always an important principle, I think, for a writer.

As an example, I do a lot of signings around the place, in bookshops and so on. They're not always successful, any writer will tell you this. Sometimes it's marvelous and there's a queue before you go in, and that's good for the ego. But other times no-one will show up. I've done signings in places like Bicester where four people turn up in the course of an afternoon. I never get downhearted, because you

know you've got readers anyhow, it just happens there are only four in Bicester, or the others are at a football match. But what it does is encourage the publishers. The publisher knows you're willing to turn out for their side, as it were. Also it encourages the bookseller. So I do those things.

But it encourages you to know you're going to get an award, particularly from overseas. Mind you, if you were waiting for awards in this country... hah! Such a terrible slum country. I'm afraid, you know, the truth is that science fiction is an American product now, increasingly I think, and I'm sorry it is so.

KINCAID: But British science fiction has always gone its own way. It's been much closer to the mainstream of literature than American science fiction. Doesn't that awake a similar response from the mainstream? People being more willing to accept science fiction for what it is?

ALDISS: Once I would have given you a fairly positive answer to that, but I don't know. It's a battle that I've always fought and would always fight, for the acceptance by the ordinary reader. I mean, I think they don't know what they're missing. That was one of the objectives of **Billion Year Spree**, if possible to force it down their throats by the back door.

But I think that science fiction is accepted on a shock level. You can turn on your television and get all kinds of shlock SF. And people must read all those dreadful paperbacks, **Horseclans** and all that kind of thing. Who the hell reads those? It doesn't seem to be the science fiction fans that you and I know, but someone's reading them.

So in the most awful way I think it has become very widely accepted. But in the process, something's been ironed out of it.

But to get the literary critics, the establishment, the readers of the TLS, to wake up and take notice, that's a more difficult trick. And it awaits on our all being dead, maybe.

KINCAID: You've written a number of books that are on the borderline between fiction and some other form. **Malacia Tapestry** and **Seasons In Flight** are obviously accessible to a science fiction readership, but I would have thought they were far more generally accessible; people can recognise 'literary' qualities in them.

ALDISS: Well, they can if they read them. But in a sense you only write what you can write, and I think in a way I haven't been able to sustain my interest in writing science fiction all the time. Now that's a negative way of putting it: I've wanted to do other things. I'm impatient, I will not repeat myself if I can possibly avoid it. And you're lucky if you can get someone who'll publish you to understand that.

KINCAID: Do you consider yourself an experimenter?

ALDISS: If you write something that's experimental, who are you experimenting for? You can only do it for yourself. I don't care much for experimental writing, I think.

KINCAID: I was thinking in particular of the things you were doing in the 50's.

ALDISS: **Probability A**, yes? I don't really consider that experimental. I wrote **Report On Probability A** because I thought I had a brilliant idea. That's one reason why you become a science fiction writer: you think you have a brilliant idea. I guess other people are obsessed with a brilliant character, but I had a brilliant idea for **Probability A**. I suddenly saw it. E.M. Forster says: "Realism is a term that's at the service of all schools", and that's true in the sense that everyone thinks they're writing realism. I thought there was a lot of realism in that, if you portray realism faithfully enough you get a kind of surrealism, and that's what I did. I would go on re-writing **Probability A**, who knows, by now I might be on to 'Report on Probability Z'. If I could think of any more situations or putative stories that could be told by that method. But I only ever thought of the one, the three guys stuck around the house from which they've been dismissed.

KINCAID: Is it still your favourite novel?

ALDISS: Well you know, I've said this before: you always like the novels that have been kind to you, that have been well received, like **Hothouse** and **Non-Stop**. Really, for a long time i took no interest in **Hothouse**, yet since it has a weird life of its own like Frankenstein's creature, I've sort of come to pat it on the head.

But **Probability A** people were nasty about, they sent me shitty letters about it. So it's like having an ugly child, you favour the ugly child. And I'm proud of **Probability A**. people have actually thought again about it, and liked it. And it's still in print, it's remained in print for a long time.

KINCAID: I've always wondered whether the 'literary establishment' responded favourably towards it. It's the sort of book that should have appealed to their pretensions.

ALDISS: The fact is, there really isn't such a thing as a 'literary establishment'. All there is, is a black hole where you think it should be. It's like being very long-sighted and picking up some print that you think is going to tell you something when you can't focus on it. What there is, is only a diversity of opinion. Where do you find this 'literary establishment'? Melvyn Bragg? The Society of Authors? It doesn't exist. But nevertheless it's shorthand for something we all recognise.

Accepting that, then actually **Probability A was** well received by a lot of people you actually couldn't call establishment figures, except in this codified shorthand. For instance, Robert Nye in the Guardian really went to town on it, and funnily enough Jill Tweedie did.

You see, in **Probability A** there are genuine emotions there all right, but they're not expressed in the text. I think it's interesting, it makes the reader do a lot of the work.

KINCAID: Readers don't like doing a lot of work.

ALDISS: You know, they do come round to it, actually. Of course if they were brought up on pulps where everything's lying there on the surface, then they don't like it.

I had to talk at the Rutherford Laboratory just the other side of Didcot recently, and one of the scientists came up to me afterwards, and he just wanted to talk about **Probability A**. How marvelous this was, and how obsessed he was, and how he'd now read it three or four times, and he ended this peroration by saying: "Now tell me, what's it about?". You know, that's marvelous, I think that's the correct response really. We don't have to have everything explained to us, it's interesting occasionally to have something enigmatic. It does satisfy something within us.

KINCAID: I must admit I didn't like it when I first read it, but it's one of those books that have stayed in my mind, more than a lot of books that were more immediately accessible. I like that about a book.

ALDISS: There's no resolution, I suppose that's why. There's no orgasm, this is the whole thing. You never come, and so you are left with the thing in a way. And I'm left with it too. I can easily recapture the novel in my mind.

KINCAID: Do you get bored easily? You can change so much - each book seems to be very different from what has gone before. You seem to like to ring the changes a lot.

ALDISS: In that respect, yes. On the other hand, I'm very hard to bore when it comes to writing and reading. I'm a very scrupulous and devoted writer. I don't piss off and do nothing, or very rarely. I used to, but I don't now. I work very hard. I don't get bored by that. But I don't get bored because I ring the changes, there's always something else coming along.

KINCAID: Do you write to a strict schedule?

ALDISS: No, that's boring. One reason why I wanted to get out of the job was I couldn't bear working every day from nine to five. I don't mind days when I work from eight in the morning till ten at night, but it has to be irregular, that's the great thing. Or when I work from ten at night till five in the morning, that's fine. There's variety in it.

KINCAID: Do you rewrite a lot?

ALDISS: Yes, probably too much. But then, you don't always get things right the first time.

KINCAID: Your books have a texture about them, a richness. **Malacia Tapestry** and **Helliconia** seem to be particular examples. It seems to be the result of a lot of hard work, but it reads very easily. Was Helliconia intended to be a trilogy from the start?

ALDISS: Oh yes. Well, I wanted to do it in one volume, but there was no way, once you have the conception of the very long year. You're bound to give your readers spot checks at various points in the orbit, and the dramatic bits come in Spring, Summer and Winter. You've got to do that. And you've got to introduce them to characters; there's no way that astronomical and cosmological material's going to be interesting unless it's delivered through character. So, are you going to build up three casts of characters and destroy them all in one book? How are you going to do it?

For a long time I was horsing around with a big estate where it would all take place. Somehow I was going to cram it all into one volume, it was going to be about someone's great great great grandfather, and that sort of continuity. But I just thought that was so anti-scientific and corny and cliched, and it would have sounded too much like England or the West and I didn't want that. I wanted it so that people couldn't identify it, but it sometimes sounded like China or India or Eskimoland - and you have to visualise the people as, well, they look like Canadian Eskimos really.

KINCAID: You're not really a very science-oriented science fiction writer, yet obviously the springboard for **Helliconia** is the creation of an entire world; very detailed, almost obsessive creation of it. Was it a deliberate exercise to try and write that sort of book?

ALDISS: You invite several answers at once. But I don't think that is the springboard. To use your metaphor, that is the swimming pool, the springboard was feeling. With me it's always feeling. And the feeling was: how terrible it would be to be on a planet with a very long year knowing that it was growing late, the leaves were beginning to fall, and the rest of your life was going to be taken up by winter. Supposing you're 21 and you suddenly see the leaves going down and from then on it's going to get worse.

But you asked me whether I designedly wrote a novel with science fiction backing, and I designedly did. I realised about ten years ago that most of my novels have been, among other things, arguments with the science fiction field itself. I'm a very literary writer, I always like the argument within the field. This is why I think I miss the magazines, because they always provide a dialogue. It was very rich when there were all those magazines.

Non-Stop was a dialogue with Heinlein, to say: Look, chum, you're doing it wrong, I can do better. It was enormous cheek of a young writer, but I thought I could do it better. Although I can now see the errors of **Non-Stop**, and actually I'm going to rewrite it, greyer and grittier, 30 years on. I have this duel, not with Heinlein now but with my younger self.

But I'd say that many of my novels were a reaction against assumptions that I thought science fiction writers, and I suppose readers, made. For instance, **The Dark Light Years** is obviously an argument against interstellar travel and colonisation. We're far too shitty to do it. Although the shit seems to be with the utods, it's the Earth people who are actually the shits.

I always thought that there was something to react against, and that something was good ol' hard core science fiction, the way Poul Anderson writes it. But then it appeared - and maybe it was in part due to the nonsense we got up to in 'New Worlds' - that there was no longer this Massif Central of science fiction. It was disappearing like a lump of sugar in tea. How did it come about? Well, the forces outside the science fiction field, something to do with the shape of the world. But of course, much as I hate science fiction, I love it even more. Then was my chance to write science fiction, when everyone else had gone away. I could work on the frontiers at the centre. And so that was another reason why I wanted to do it.

KINCAID: I suppose the thing that impressed me most about **Helliconia Winter** was the synoptic future history of Earth. Very Stapledon.

ALDISS: I thought it would have been a bit flat to deal merely with Helliconia. That was one of my big decisions to take. But once I'd got the Avernus in its orbit I could see that the people there were the victims of a kind of scientism, that they were very much the victims of pure logicality. Just as the people were in the spaceship in **Non-Stop**. That's the obvious parallel. So that their lives were going to be ones of increasing sterility.

Then you needed a third entity. You had the natural, spontaneous life of Helliconia; you had the triumph of the intellect on the Avernus; so Earth had to stand in as half way between the two. It had to be the mixture of head and heart, to use a metaphor of which I was once over-fond. It had to combine the two, not just the emotional and not just the intellectual, and after a period of scrounging it had to come through to a much more unified life.

I found the synoptic history fascinating too. Of course Stapledon has to be the model for any British writer attempting anything on a grand scale. As he said of H.G. Wells: Stapledon is the atmosphere you breath.

I also see, despite all the leaping around I've done in my career, there is nevertheless a theme of dialectic within myself, and it's very much summed up in **Helliconia** in which you can see bits of all my books in a horrible way. The people on the Avernus are stuck in a **Probability A** situation. I think the atmosphere of **Hothouse** is there. And Margaret says that in Oldorando she sees Malacia.

But the book that I see as the forerunner of **Helliconia** is **Galaxies Like Grains Of Sand**. In the new Granada edition they include Norman Spinrad's very intelligent introduction. He says that in there it's like an early forecast of all the themes I was to employ, and I think that's so. In fact I deliberately introduced one or two little bits into **Helliconia** that were in **Galaxies Like Grains Of Sand**. For instance, the flying fish that arrive so providentially at the end of **Summer** came straight from **Galaxies**. One likes, playfully, to make these linkages.

KINCAID: **Helliconia** was also different from your other work in its scope; it's an incredibly broad canvas. With the short stories of **Seasons Of Flight**, was it a relief to get back to a narrower focus? Was it relaxation from the broad canvas of **Helliconia**?

ALDISS: It was a relief, if you'll accept at the same time it was a tremendous joy doing those large canvases. Again it's my ambition and my modesty in conflict; and I can't think why, if not for reasons of modesty, I didn't long ago attempt those broad canvases. It is amazingly exciting to unroll a drama that has over 40 speaking parts. It's great fun to deploy all that you know and feel through so many characters. I think there's something like a dozen quite major characters in **Summer**, and sometimes it's clumsily done but in other things it's done quite effectively. And I found that I like doing that, and seek a way to do it again.

KINCAID: Did you feel that you were sacrificing depth for breadth?

ALDISS: Let me give you one brief example of the sort of thing you can do if you have a broad canvas. The Queen of Queens: how do you convince your readers that she is actually good and beautiful? Well, you have a character who can't bear her. And there's a minor character, her lady in waiting, May, who is the sister of the general whom the Queen thinks she fancies, Tolram Ketinet. May can't bear being with the Queen, she's pissed off and bored with her. May hardly seems to exist, but if you read through the novel conscious of May then you see she also has a character of her own. Although she's hardly a speaking part.

And equally, I think, the novel is largely about possession, the way people possess each other. The great romantic thing in the middle of the novel is when Tolram Ketinet finally gets ashore at Gravabagalinien and spends the night with the Queen. Wow, how romantic. But in the morning you realise she didn't really go for him, she didn't want him, she's still possessed by the king.

And I think there are real and truthful touches that you can only get with a broad canvas because you can lose them. They are there but they can be lost and nothing much is made of them. But if you design novels you perhaps hope to be read by some weird people more than once, and those things I think get through to you.

KINCAID: Do you feel you've been stuck with the genre? You've done quite a lot of non-genre work which has been critically praised, yet you still seem to be labeled 'Brian Aldiss, the science fiction writer.

ALDISS: Yes. Hell, you know one gets bored with any label. But science fiction's my language, I speak it, I learned it. But I don't think you should deliberately make a commercial choice. You should try and see what's within you and what you truly want to write, and write that. I still think it's quite easy to become a writer. It is very difficult to continue being a writer. We all know a number of walking tragedies, of writers who've long ago ceased to write anything meaningful, and are still shackled to their typewriter because they haven't got enough ingenuity to get out and dig a road or do something else. They're stuck with being a writer. That is awful, an awful state to be in.

KINCAID: Brian Aldiss, thank you very much.

CITY IN ASHES

Ken Lake on Simak

BACK IN THE FORTIES, THERE WERE NO LPs: MY MONTHLY RATION OF traditional and New Orleans jazz, blues and swing came to no more than three or four three-minute 78rpm discs, and naturally I bought every one and played them till I could "hear" them note for note anytime, anywhere. I still can, today, when the right stimulus is present.

Bob Shaw told us in Matrix 61 all about SF in the forties - its paucity, the joy with which we re-read every magazine that swam into our ken, till we probably knew the tales word for word. But that's not all there was to it.

Jazz falls into many categories, has many exponents and styles and a history spreading over decades. With our pitiful 78s we could grasp no more than the edges of this picture, and we strove to build up partial sets of a given artist's work; the records appeared out of context and out of any chronological sequence, the good with the bad, and we sharpened our critical tastes slowly and by a bitter devotion to our vision of truth.

Many of the "classic novels" of SF appeared piecemeal in the magazines, often over several years, and there was always a chance you'd miss one part of the story or come across it out of sequence in an imported American 'Astounding' rather than waiting for the British reprint edition. But each of what today's readers think of as merely a "chapter" was the whole story to us, just as today you can snap up a four-LP set that spans Louis Armstrong's greatest recordings from 1924 to 1930. With such a modern concentration of stimuli, is it any wonder that fans cannot see the wood for the trees?

Buy an LP, and how often do you play it? Buy a novel or fix-up, and how many readings does it get? We're inundated with information now, and it's probably not a good thing.

Simak's short story **City** came to me around 1944 as culture shock: I knew neither the slang he used, nor the town he described. The future postulates posed no problems - I just couldn't empathise with his basic setting.

Huddling Place, later that year, was something else - a tale of despair, an early example perhaps of that downbeat trend that has (to my mind) constantly marred US SF from many an author. But both stories left their mark on me, and both served as benchmarks for much that I later read.

With **Census** the series entered a new phase: the old world was gone, robots, mutants and talking dogs were established and I was agog to learn where Simak would take them; Joe was a perennial favourite - what young person could not empathise with this anarchic teenager, no more than 120 years of his thousand-year life past and already kicking up his heels and making irremedial alterations in mankind's path?

Desertion sketched out a grand new future for old, decrepit, degenerate mankind - setting off to live for centuries in those grand, all-sensing Loper bodies on Jupiter, thanks again to Joe's intervention and in the face of the stubborn Webster inability to budge from man's oldtime narrow-mindedness. For days afterward I could feel my new muscles as I raced across the methane-and-ammonia wastelands of our greatest planet - truly a new life, I've never felt so fit since then.

And so it went: each shot in the arm, many months apart,. gave me two separate thrills - the thrill of the new experience, and the reminder of thrill s and pleasures past from earlier installments in this Future History. The unusual nature of the protagonists - at least for that period, when robots were mostly marauding merciless warriors or the toys of Asimov's scientific fancy, when animals were lesser breeds and not the successors to man - added to the appeal, and truly it could be said that in those days a Simak story was something unique, as indeed was an Asimov, a Williamson or a Blish for us awestruck and wonderfilled inheritors of war's shortages and austerities.

But that was then. Now, years later, for the first time renewing my contact with the **City** sequence, I am grievously disappointed. In fact, I feel cheated. It's not that (as Simak himself admits) **City** itself is "rawboned and slung together" - in fact, it still reads well given the conventions of the time, its subject matter and one's greater acceptance of US dialect today. But the mawkishness! The slices of pseudo-sincerity, the slabs of kitsch countryman's facile moralising! Oh dear, rush on to **Huddling Place!**

Again, the picturesque speech and patter is what dates - and spoils - this one for me. I guess that no matter how many times I read it in 1944 and thereafter, I must wilfully have closed my eyes to all this, regarding it as some strange, foreign, American aberration that I was too insular to appreciate. Now I know I'm not insular - it was Simak's own xenophobia that was revealed here for all to see.

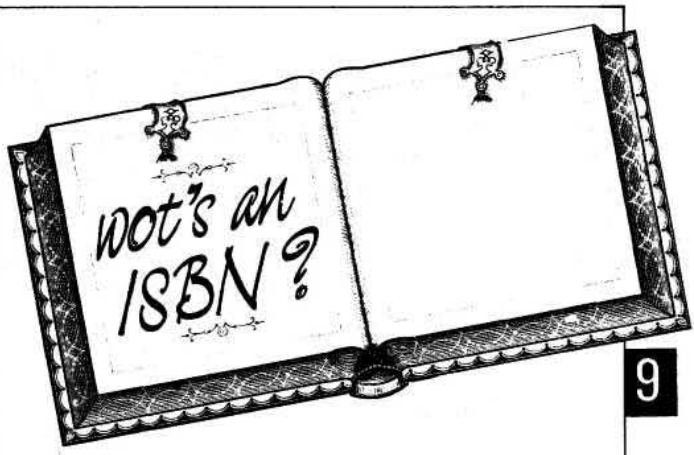
Census still reads well to me: neat and complete in itself, though still tinged by recollection of the illustration that accompanied its first appearance and showed the ants in their airconditioned, industrialised hill. This one could still stand alone - what a pity it's lost in the paperback. **Desertion** still carries a powerful emotional punch for me, so long as it's read with **Paradise** as a single episode (surely how Simak visualized it first?

But taking the book as a whole, there is one thing that ruins its impact, trivialises its themes and reduces it to the level of a child's storybook or one of those tongue-in-cheek creations that the unbeatable Robert Sheckley knocks off occasionally with a flair, panache and humour that is completely lacking in this feeble Simak copy.

I mean, of course, those twee and insufferable additions headed "Notes on the First Tale" and so forth, that purport to redefine and interpret the stories through the eyes of the Dogs of the immeasurably future world where all true remembrance of man has disappeared. The constant silly references to mature Doggish researchers as Rover, Tige and Bounce grate every time I fall across them - at least in the original stories Simak gave his early talking dogs the dignity of names like Nathaniel.

And the whole childish concept of these "notes" simply destroys the one thing that Simak could claim with his original stories: integrity, and integrity he has thrown away with this needless meddling that has wrecked, for me at least, an attempt to seek temps perdu, to relive something that I have held in my heart for thirty years and which is now ashes in my mouth.

ODDS & ENDS



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"YES, BUT DID YOU like IT?"

Colin Greenland

WHEN YOU GET A GOOD REVIEW, YOUR FIRST RESPONSE IS NOT "YES, yes, how just, how true, how gratifying", but "Thank goodness they didn't notice all the things wrong with it". There is a cycle of fluctuating exhilaration and despair that every author has to ride, alternately loving and hating their own work as it goes through the process that takes it from their fingertips to the cold, uncaring world outside. Brian Aldiss described the latter stages of this perfectly in **Hell's Cartographers**.

> The publisher's proofs bring you to the nadir of hope: the material is stale, you no longer laugh at your own jokes, weep at your own tragedies, blench at your own truths. But, with luck, the whole thing looks much more imposing when you get your six bound complimentary copies. Thus encouraged, you turn like a stag at bay to face the baying of the reviewers.

So many writers seem to see reviewing as a bloodsport, a kind of licensed and ritualized savagery in which the hounds are let loose, once a week, to harry and rend the tender flanks of the hart. You've sweated and starved for year after year to produce your literary offering. In three minutes and three hundred words some smarmy Oxbridge tyro has pounced on it, torn off a couple of careless gobbets to quote out of context, misunderstood the irony, misrepresented the intent, compared you unfavourably and insinuatingly to someone you've never even read, given away the plot and pinched your best joke for a punchline. Reviewers are idle, shallow, ill-informed creatures. They wouldn't even exist if it weren't for you and your fellow novelists; and to make it worse, they've every one of them got an unfinished novel on top of the wardrobe gathering dust, it's called **Landscape with Figures**, written half like James Joyce and half like Ernest Hemingway, and it is truly terrible. And they dare to come it with their "intermittently convincing" and their "shakily constructed". If you know so much about it, snarls the novelist at bay, go away and write your own novel.

I once almost got into trouble with the editor of a music magazine who had commissioned an article from me. I delivered it; he liked it; we went off to the pub, where he was shortly fulminating against editors and proprietors who use non-union writers. This was obviously a hobby-horse of his, though he drove it like a tank, and was trundling rapidly to the point where I would either have to lie or else face the man with the humiliating fact that he himself had just unwittingly employed such a scab, namely me. I was saved when one of his team, more interested in sci-fi than socialism, interrupted to ask me where the rest of my writing appeared. I mentioned my novel. The response was almost embarrassing. Everybody stopped chatting and began to shower congratulations and press pints upon me. Suddenly I was an artist, I suppose like Jimmy Page, instead of just being like somebody who wrote about Jimmy Page. Glory shone round about me.

Admittedly, the admiration was social, not critical. They knew nothing about my novel, whether it was a work of genius or a piece of crap. Probably the editorial team of **Vector** would be similarly impressed to discover that some chance new contributor had just signed to Polydor and put out a first album. The profession of art is still glamorous to other people, even under the contemporary rule of brute commercialism. When I went in to have my application for the Public Lending Right witnessed, the commissioner of oaths nearly climbed on his chair with excitement.

"I've never met a real writer before!" he enthused.

"I've never met a real commissioner of oaths", I assured him. Perhaps I should have jumped up and down too, just to be polite.

Even inside literary circles, where glamour's reserved for people who appear on The Book Quiz, it still makes a difference if a reviewer has a claim to be a novelist too, however minor and embryonic. Accusations of parasitism melt away in the face of your very own book, which signifies by its mere existence, its status as publication, that you know what it's like, you know how to do it, and you have done it, made the distance from blank sheet to complimentary copy. It doesn't even seem to matter that your own effort is shakily constructed and intermittently convincing, as long as it's there. You feel more qualified to pronounce, more real, somehow. Whether or not you should is another question.

Sometimes it seems to me that creative and critical writing are entirely separate faculties, only by chance to found residing in the same brain. It may be quite proper for reviewers never to have completed novels of their own, because their skills lie in analysing rather than synthesizing, taking fiction apart rather than putting it together. Perhaps that might also be the reason why the harassed novelist mistrusts and resents the reviewer, the two of them working the same ore but at cross-purposes.

Circumstances can blur the distinction. Maybe that psychological pressure does push some writers into producing fiction when their talents lie in another direction. Last year several people were heard to complain that Julian Barnes's Booker-nominated **Flaubert's Parrot** was not really a novel at all but a book of essays about Flaubert. What certainly does happen, all the time, is that novelists have to turn to reviewing because no one's paying them a retainer to writer novels, and the next royalty cheque is always further off than the next phone bill. Not that it's only financial constraints that have this effect. There are also the pressures of "special interests". If no one is taking any notice of your art, you may be obliged to start the discussion yourself. The much-lamented inability of academic literary criticism to come to terms with or even recognise the existence of science fiction was what first stimulated SF authors to supply their own. Fed by the traditions of open debate at cons and in fanzines, including **Vector**, there has been quite a line of practitioners who have also worked as commentators: James Blish, Damon Knight, Brian Aldiss, Samuel Delany, Ursula Le Guin, Brian Stableford, Joanna Russ, Kim Stanley Robinson... I wouldn't be at

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all surprised if the same thing were true of feminist fiction writers and reviewers in the last ten or fifteen years.

Note, by the way, the subtle but crucial difference in credibility between the reviewer required to "prove it" with a novel, and the novelist whose critical opinions are sought and valued. Harriett Gilbert of the **New Statesman** rings me to ask if I would review Brian Stableford's **Scientific Romance in Britain**, a subject of which I have no knowledge, blush blush.

"Who would know about that sort of thing, then?" she asks.

"Um... Brian Stableford?" I suggest, feebly.

"What about Doris Lessing?"

"Doris Lessing?"

"Yes."

"Well, she's read Olaf Stapledon..."

"I think I'll try her", says Harriett, and off she goes.

No reflection on Harriett, who is a fine editor, but the principle is clear: if you can't get an expert, get a Name.

Which raises the whole question of what reviewers are supposed to be doing anyway. Paul Kincaid and Andy Sawyer's job is to provide a critical survey of recent publications in the field that we're all interested in. The **New Statesman** is a broad-based left-wing review, so Harriett Gilbert has no such specialist audience to feed. She has to help produce a general weekly magazine. Philip Howard, literary editor of the **Times**, goes further. He believes, he says:

> "...that the world would be a better place if more people read good books. But this has nothing to do with journalism. Au contraire.
>
> Neither is it the main function of a books page to tell readers of books that they might enjoy reading, admirable though such an activity is... Books pages have to justify their existence as lively journalism in a world in which journalism becomes livelier every day."

First and last, the professional reviewer has to provide good copy, and copy to fit. Critical insights give way to column inches, every time.

Non-literary people tend to assume reviewing is a cushy number. Getting paid for reading books and saying what you think of them: what a doss. My next-door-neighbour, self-employed like me, will get home in the middle of a sunny afternoon, tired and dusty from humping carpets about, to find me lounging on the lawn with an iced drink and a book.

"You don't half work hard", says Jack, meaning the opposite.

And I say, well, yes I do, but I can tell he's not convinced. He'll say it again tomorrow.

It's one thing when the book in question is the new Fred Hoyle or Frank Herbert, and he can hear my pitiful groans and see me clawing at the daisies in despair. The corollary to the Protestant work ethic is that, to be perfectly dignified, labour must be unpleasant. So it's hard to make a satisfactory show of toil and sweat when the book is the new Angela Carter or M. John Harrison and I'm loving every line.

Jack doesn't see me after midnight, still at my desk, struggling to justify the ways of Josephine Saxton to the readers of the **Times Literary Supplement**.

How can it be hard work to read a book and say what you think about it?

For a start, if anyone can do it, then it's automatically hard for anyone to do professionally. Why should an editor call upon you rather than anyone else? If you're not a Name, then you'd better be an expert, or able to pass for one at fifty paces. If I'd said to Harriett Gilbert, "Well, I have read a few H.G. Wells, of course, and **Star Maker**, thought that must have been all of ten years ago; and I did see a rather interesting article about Jack London the other day", she would have sent me **Scientific Romance in Britain**, and I would have made a right hash of it.

Reviewers have to read a lot, far more than they'll ever have cause to mention in a particular review. This creates a professional problem when you're reviewing so much you don't have time to read anything else. I'm continually coming up against new books by authors whose previous work I simply don't know. This week it's A.N. Wilson and Anita Brookner. Last week it was Damon Knight and Robert Aickman. There's something to be said for the innocent eye, the fresh appraisal of somebody's eleventh book just as it stands, alone irrespective of the accumulated achievement and reputation of the previous ten; but you'd better make sure you do the research if you're not going to commit some ignorant gaffe which will alienate your editor, or if it gets through, make a fool of you in print. (I'm almost certain **Gentlemen in England** is the first novel A.N. Wilson's set wholly in the nineteenth century, but oh god is it?) Reviewing is educational, not least for the reviewer.

Reviewing is also analytical. Here opinions, approaches and working methods differ widely. There are those who believe that there are objective, external canons of truth, taste and virtue, and that the reviewer's task is to measure the book by them. Others strive to recover formal structures of meaning that inhere in a text regardless of its author's assumptions or its readers' dispositions. Woolly-minded eclectic that I am, I think there's something useful in each doctrine, but wouldn't confine myself to either. Assuredly, objectively, there is structure: otherwise nothing would be communicated. Language is structure, and it's certainly worth examining any book, and especially a work of fantasy or SF, to see how the relationships, actions and fields of possibility within it are organised. This sort of analysis often reveals a much stranger and more interesting shape within a text than its ostensible surface story. Every writer has a position, or range of positions, whether they want to sing and shout about them, like Marge Piercy and Robert Heinlein, or keep you guessing, like Thomas Disch and Gene Wolfe. When the assumptions or the message of a book do not measure up to my experience of the world, I shall want to say so; though I hope the day when all fiction in Britain has to confirm to preset ideological standards is further off than it sometimes seems.

It is also part of the reviewer's job to locate a book in the larger contexts to which it belongs - not just within an author's complete works, but also in the general scheme of contemporary literature, for the **TLS** for example, or within its publishing history, perhaps, for the more streetwise audience of **City Limits**. ("**The Golden Barge**, Moorcock's first novel, was more or less lost and forgotten until Dave Britton and Mike Butterworth of Savoy Books got their hands on a copy and told him they were going to publish it. Their handsome 1979 trade paperback edition was seen by very few people, owing to unsatisfactory distribution arrangements with New English Library. Now that it's disappeared altogether, NEL see fit to produce their own hardback, which will be the first time the book's been generally available.")

Reviewing also, despite everything I said above on the difference between writing and writing about writing, requires a kind of creativity itself. In a sense, a review is an expression of a personal experience, the experience of reading a book. If you look back at literary essayists of the last century, such as Charles Lamb and William Hazlitt, you'll find that this was the primary purpose of writing about writing. It was enough to isolate passages they found particularly "sublime" and quote them at length, with appropriate rapturous comments before and after. This is not really on any more, unfortunately. The Statesman would not pay me money just to write out bits of A.N. Wilson, even the best bits, more's the pity. But reviews are signed, as a matter of course, and they still consist of subjective appraisals of books, though the subjective response will be that of an informed, conscientious sensibility, with any luck (unless it is that of a Name, in which case you know what to expect).

The book trade, however, tends to treat "the reviewers" as though we constituted some sort of tribunal, sitting together in judgment on a book. Despite the incestuous nature of the literary coteries and the amount of professional cross-checking that inevitably goes on ("Hello? Pat? Have **you** read A.N. Wilson"), such a consensus rarely exists. When disagreements vacillate wildly, there are sales to be made on the strength of "controversy". Futura's paperback of Iain Banks' first novel **The Wasp Factory** opens with three whole pages of quotes from strongly-worded reviews, violently for, violently against, and violently both (its that sort of book).

One of the things we should treasure about the informality of fan criticism in **Vector**, **Paperback Inferno** and elsewhere, is the freedom it allows the reviewer to declare personal prejudices, circumstances and accidents that influence and interrupt the actual experience of reading. In the proper professional world you're really not at liberty to say "I wasn't really able to concentrate on this book because the cat was being sick" until you get to the exalted region of Auberon Waugh and Bernard Levin. Then subjectivity becomes a strong suit, declared instead of disguised, and the personality of the star reviewer starts to cannibalise the author, which is a nonsense.

Given that reviewers start from their personal experience of a book, and aim to show how it fits in the various complex contexts to which it belongs, they still have to appraise each book in terms of what its author set out to do. It's no good disparaging Anne McCaffrey for failing to be Joanna Russ, or vice versa. This is another reason copious reading is required. Familiarity with the enormous variety of writers and kinds of writing is the only way of maintaining that vital flexibility of response. Further more, you must not only appreciate the individual qualities of each writer and book yourself, but convey them to your readers. This also entails a degree of creative skill. Reviews which blankly reiterate the story of a book are tedious, and may easily spoil the pleasure of reading the book itself. There is far too much of this lazy and inconsiderate style of reviewing, not only in amateur publications, where it can be attributed to ignorance and inexperience, but also in journals of extreme sophistication. The short film reviews at the front of the **New Yorker** are clearly designed as substitutes for the films concerned, predigested for the benefit of those who can't be bothered to watch them but want to have opinions about them to circulate over cocktails.

Instead of parroting the plot, a good review might attempt a recreation of the book in miniature, capturing its tone and

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characteristic language both while relating and discussing actual scenes and incidents from the book, and while commenting on it from a critical distance. Such a review should make the readers feel they have had a glimpse of the book itself, sufficient to sustain the reviewer's favourable or unfavourable evaluation and, more importantly, to convince them that they have seen enough to make up their own minds whether they want to read the book or not. This approach to reviewing, particularly useful for introducing an unknown writer to a prospective new audience, can require hours of searching out and balancing your mots justes, though there are writers who hand you the requisite vocabulary on an irresistible plate. Well, you try writing about J.G. Ballard without using the words "terminal", "fragmented", "disaster" or "landscape".

As with any process of transfer from one form to another, this trick of "miniaturisation" necessitates omissions and distortions. It is important to know when inaccuracy will serve better than precision. The Great Wheel of Kharnabhar in Brian Aldiss' **Helliconia Winter** is a monstrous edifice inside a mountain: a sort of circular prison or monastery whose walls radiate like the spokes of a wheel. Each day the trumpets blow and the 1,825 solitary inmates haul on chains to move the vast weight of the stone round one more place. Thus they progress on a continual penitential journey from the single door of the Wheel round into the heart of the mountain and back, eventually, to the door again. I didn't have time to go into this in detail in my review. I had to come up with one term which would convey its most important qualities. The nearest English word for such a construction I can think of is "turnstile". But "turnstile" has none of the implications of mass, of arduous movement, of incarceration. I opted for "treadmill", which has all of these plus the sense of labouring around in a circle and going nowhere. It's not correct; but it does the job better than the more accurate

As one whose job it is both to write and to write about writing, I would maintain that this, and many other refractions to which a reviewer routinely subjects a book, all go to produce something which is just as true to the printed text as the author's original intentions are. Years before structuralism, the poet and critic Paul Valery wrote:

> There is no true meaning to a text - no author's authority. Whatever he may have wanted to say, he has written what he has written. Once published, a text is like an apparatus that anyone may use as he will and according to his ability: it is not certain that the one who constructed it can use it better than another. Besides, if he knows well what he meant to do, this knowledge always disturbs his perceptions of what he has done.

One abiding incompatibility between the reviewer and the author is that a reviewer will always give an author full responsibility for a text, and treat everything as if it were exactly "what he meant to do". I observed, for example,that the peculiar time-sequence of its opening chapters "show Silverberg working to bring to **Valentine Pontifex** the dramatic complexity and vigour he smoothed out of **Lord Valentine's Castle**". The assumption is that Silverberg was in full control of each book; that each word represents a conscious and deliberate decision. Any writer, published or not, knows only too well that it doesn't work like that. A writer's experience of writing is far more chaotic, disorganised, tentative even; a compromise between will and contingency. Sometimes you know what you should be writing but you literally, mentally, physically, cannot do it. Sometimes you write without understanding what you are writing.

Authors, whose relationship to their books is intimate and, to risk a biological metaphor, parental, will always deplore the inadequacies of reviewers, whose relationship to books is more like that of an employer writing a reference. However you go about it, as a reviewer you are trying to say what each book is, often in a very few words, for an audience pre-selected by the nature of the publication you're writing for, only some of whom will actually be interested. That can be, and really should be, hard work, even with the slimmest and slightest of novels; harder still with fat novels and trilogies; hardest of all with single-author collections and anthologies, because you must either review the stories individually, which soon gets bitty and boring, or struggle to come up with comments which are appropriate to all the stories generally without being uselessly vague. And it's hard to review anything by Garry Kilworth, if you're to stay friendly with him that is, because after you've toiled to articulate your reading of his book, convey its qualities, locate it in its philosophic and literary context, etc. etc., he's liable to come up to you at some inconvenient occasion and say, petulantly, "Yes, but you didn't say whether you liked it". My moment of justification was when I'd gone through and through his collection **The Songbirds of Pain**, and decided to say that "the shadow of crucifixion, immolation, sacrifice, lies darkly across all thirteen stories".

"I never realised that!" said Garry, pleased. At least I think he was pleased.

BOOKS

REVIEWS EDITED BY Paul Kincaid

BEST SF OF THE YEAR 14 - ed Terry Carr
[Gollancz, 1985, 376pp, £9.95 hardback
£4.95 paperback]

Reviewed by K.V. Bailey

TERRY'S ANNUAL, CONTAINING HIS 13 BEST, IS a somewhat metaphysically tinctured assortment. God in one guise or another seems to share the cast list with the all-knowing, all-seeing, all-creative computers or extra-terrestrials. Where these leading characters most often meet, and sometimes merge, is in the pervading psychobiological arena.

The longest piece is John Varley's Nebula Award novella 'Press Enter'. Terry Carr in his introductory note to this assures me that it will have me chuckling and nodding my head: a few wry smiles and grimaces would be nearer the mark. The story starts with an investigative set-up - a grotesque Vietnamese boat-girl genius from Cal Tech in the Holmes role and a neurotic middle-aged Korean War veteran in Watson's. They are following the trail left, posthumously, by a Napoleon of computer crime, a Moriarty of the hacking game. The detection is fascinating; what it leads to, though grisly, is in its implications equally so.

The most tautly written of the stories, Nancy Kress's 'Trinity', is also concerned with a desperate pursuit of the unknown. Seena, the narrator, traumatised by the results of experimenting with trance induction in cloned individuals, retreats to a museum curatorship of Arthropoda, specialising in radiation-mutated moths. She fails in an attempt to rescue her sister and her sister's cloned twin from an experimental situation. Entranced in a holotank in a Caribbean semi-monastic biofeedback research institute, they are bent on achieving, through orgasm-catalysis, brain perception of an entity to whose

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consciousness and purposes they may be only as the mutated moths are to Seena's consciousness. The interplay of Freudian drive and Jungian motivation within this scenario is skillfully managed. The denouement is open-ended and disturbing - so much so to Seena that she is glad to get back to her permaplex-sealed moths and to her New York apartment where, for the rest of her life, she "will keep the heavy drapes down tightly to avoid the glass".

A slightly less satisfactory story, a stylistic and imaginative tour de force but spun through so many tracts of surreal territory that the mind not only boggles but gets bogged down, is Bob Leman's 'Instructions'. Here the protagonist - or pawn-like victim - is alien-directed through programmed areas of pain and uncertainty to no end, and no acceptable purpose, other than one of ephemeral ludic relief for bored aliens. It might have been written by Lewis Carroll in hell.

The editor in his prefatory notes is keen to prepare readers for humour, as in Connie Willis' 'Blue Moon' and in 'The Alien Who Knew, I Mean Everything' by George Alec Effinger. The former, described as "a funny novelette likely to stretch your grin", displays a certain mad hilarity in developing the phenomena of coincidence in the direction of the absurd. It also has good fun at the expense of technological and academic jargon. 'The Alien Who Knew..' is about extra-terrestrial do-gooders with eccentric but inflexible criteria who, wanting to help poor old Earth, start by filling the Sahara with hollyhocks. The story moves on several levels of satire and send-up, and is very funny. Charles L. Harness brings his alien to earth in conventional manner for spaceship repair - which improbably he manages to effect with mummy wrappings and soda water, having landed in Ptolemaic Alexandria where a great theological/political row is in progress at the time of the heliacal rising of Sirius. 'Summer Solstice' is the story's title, and Eratosthenes, at the heart of the row, its hero, He is extricated by the alien (from Sirius) who actually looks like the god Horus. Pleasant to read, but only in the spirit of a not too serious charade.

The collection contains the Nebula short story and novelette winners, respectively Gardner Dozoi's 'Morning Child' and Octavia E. Butler's 'Bloodchild'. Gardner Dozoi's story, beautifully crafted, with memorable imagery of catastrophe, is a macabre cameo of the impact of bio-effective weaponry. 'Bloodchild' channels both human and alien sexual emotion into situations whose prototypes lie in entomological life-cycles and in parasitology. A fantasised blend of parasitism, embryology and biotechnics makes Lee Montgomerie's 'Green Hearts' companion-piece to 'Bloodchild'. Somewhat in later Ballardian vein, its techno/organic stresses are manifested in vegetable loves, and materialised through cloning. A gem of a story.

Pamela Sargent's 'Fears' is less a story than a frame for dialogue and monologue in the contexts of a one-sex (masculine) world. In 'The Lucky Strike' by Kim Stanley Robinson, a military decision is plausibly and dramatically made, though its alternative-world consequences seem less plausible. It attains great poignancy in descriptions of man's planet turning from night towards day as seen through high-altitude bomb-sights.

Tanith Lee's story condenses neatly into its title: 'A Day In The Skin, or The Century We Were Out Of Them'. After a planet-mining disaster, out-of-body victims await the arrival of facilities for the supply of substitute android bodies. The few surviving intact bodies are pooled as a means by which individuals can be released for short periods from the ego-store. Into this situation Tanith Lee introduces motifs of doppleganger, bi-sexual and even Circean fantasy. It is a story both tough and tender, stretching into dimensions of allegory, with its "lords and ladies of infinite space inside a nutshell", its "ghosts out for a day in the skin".

In Michael Swanwick's 'Trojan Horse' we are still metaphysically speculative, with a God of sorts occupying a cratered islet on the moon. Spectacular settings mingle domed, terraformed and aboriginal lunar landscapes with holographed subsettings such as Chartres Cathedral. They are scene of a project to reshape the human mind, through exploration of its substructure, into God. The character Elin is the subject, the 'Trojan Horse', made to invade the absolute. "Nothing is disconnected. All the universe is a vast net of intermeshing programs." Lost among these programs, Elin reminds one a little of Alice. ""Everyone tells me what I'm going to do", Elin thought. "Don't I get any say?""

Terry Carr also lists 21 "runners-up" including Brian Aldiss' 'The Gods In Flight' which I would have thought should have made the first-team. Abiding by the editor's choice, however, it's a good stimulating edition, whether the stories are thought of individually, or the whole is considered as indicative of trends.

SLOW BIRDS - Ian Watson
[Gollancz, 1985, 190pp, £8.95]
Reviewed by Chris Bailey

SPIN THE GLOBE AND IMAGINE CONDITIONS ON the world it represents, and the changes to the assumptions of its inhabitants, if the green areas were coloured blue and the blue, green. Ian Watson, in his third story collection, repeatedly takes idle notions of this sort and, far from shirking the consequent bizarrerie, boldly presents them as current realities, transforming mental doodles into strongly visualised fictions.

Geometries are awry and physical laws run haywire but people manage well enough and the reader can enter these worlds by following characters in their daily business - pity the poor cartographer when the concept of distance is disrupted, as in 'The Width Of The World' - or by sharing their questioning of their environment, as we question that about us. Such interrogation may lead to yet more fanciful explanations or may point an accusing finger back at our own world.

In 'Slow Birds', winged missiles sporadically appear above and progressively devastate a placid and pastoral alternative Britain. More explicitly, 'Cruising' presents the flight of the missiles as a hellish ornithological migration. The splendidly succinct 'Mistress Of Cold' is deft political satire on the one hand and a remorselessly logical and literal interpretation of the phrase "the Cold War" on the other. What happens if the temperature goes below Absolute Zero? Presumably "negative heat" - as neat a formulation as any for the end that may be in store for us. Watson is as precise in his introduction: "Fantastic fiction often has its roots firmly planted in the fears and madness of the present day."

So, there is one obvious area of concern. Elsewhere one sees Watson's old fascination with reality-and-illusion taking a less cosmic and more personal emphasis. For Watson, reality still dances on hot coals, but its final resting place is within, rather than beyond, the self.

In fact, the self is damn difficult to evade - even death cannot provide an escape. The afterlife offers a succession of replayed perfect days in 'The Bloomsday Revolution' - yet consider the monotony of the physical enslavement. Or consider poor Lucretius, revived only to meet a literally untimely end. "The Carl Sagan Of Ancient Rome " nevertheless gets his own back. You have to admire Watson's stern logic if you compare this story, 'Ghost Lecturer', with, say Kit Reed's 'Mister da V'. You cannot drag ancient savants into the present day simply to poke fun at them - they are quite entitled to bring their own conceptual frameworks along with them. The moment of death is merely a knock and a jolt for John the Baptist, with worse to follow in 'The Mystic Marriage Of Salome', a remarkable and provocative piece narrated from the golden platter after the execution.

Other stories are not so explicit as to whether the afterlife will retain such close physical links with the life before. 'White Socks' and 'The Flesh Of Her Hair' are similar in theme and in presentation, both vividly staged and both finishing a little weakly. (Which goes for a couple of other stories also. Perhaps excusably, Watson cannot always cap the astonishing ideas that generate his stories.) 'White Socks' suggest how the African bush really is for the most part - scrub fires and oil trucks, a far remove from BBC wildlife films. 'The Flesh Of Her Hair' transforms a tramp steamer into a nightmarish prison and concludes very strangely ("her soul flowed into her hair..."). Both stories suggest unusual destinations for the soul after death and are also strongly felt condemnations of the hegemony of the white man in Africa.

With Watson's first story collection, six years ago, it was possible to define fairly confidently where he was at, if you'll pardon the expression. Now one cannot be so sure, although there is one reminder of an earlier Watson style, 'Universe On The Turn', an outrageous and highly enjoyable broadside of ideas. Rather than theorising, it is perhaps safer to sit back and simply enjoy the wit, verve and versatility that **Slow Birds** displays, and to note that these stories are not mere conjuring acts. Although an idle notion may provide the impetus, ultimately they come from where stories are supposed to come from. One character in the title story wonders, where is this other, crazy place, manufacturing missiles by the million and rushing headlong for destruction? The reply: ""Maybe it's right here, only we can't see it.""

B O O K S

THE HOUSE OF THE SPIRITS - Isabel Allende
[Cape, 1985, 368pp, £8.95]
Reviewed by Paul Kincaid

MAGICAL REALISM WAS LAST YEAR'S BUZZ-TERM. This year it has sunk into everyone's standard literary vocabulary. Yet it remains, like science fiction, one of those ill-comprehended things more easily pointed to than defined. The publication of Isabel Allende's wonderful book gives us a splendid opportunity to look closely at the mechanics of this literary form and try to decide what it is and what it does.

Angela Carter's **Nights At The Circus** and Peter Carey's **Illywhacker** are examples of an increasing number of books that are having the term 'magical realism' thrown at them simply because they have taken one determined step away from absolute reality. Yet I do not believe that this simple device is enough to warrant the term - good grief, if that was so half the fantasy that has ever been written would suddenly be decorated with the label and garnished with literary respectability. No, there is something indelibly South American about magical realism. But not every South American writer is automatically a magical realist, Borges for all the debt they owe him is not of their number, and **The Wandering Unicorn** by Manuel Mujica Lainez is straight fantasy.

I found one clue to my understanding of magical realism in, of all places, a travel book. In **So Far From God ...**, Patrick Marnham points out how much the Catholic Church has changed in South America, absorbing the mysticism and animism of native Indian beliefs so that it has been transformed into something almost unrecognisable by European Catholics. It seems to me that magical realism has done something analogous with reality, taking the clear-eyed Western view of the world as is, then colouring it with a native and intuitive view of a world of spirits and belief that co-exists with our world. Thus Clara, one of the central characters in this book, happily shares her house with all manner of spirits, moves salt cellars across the table without touching them, and plays Chopin without lifting the lid of the piano - and no-one sees anything extraordinary in any of this. The magical realist is not a photographer recording a scene exactly as it is, but a painter trying to inject something more into, and extract more out of, the scene. Thus it raises no eyebrows that two of the key actors in this drama have green hair, that is just how the author intuits their nature to be.

All of which may make the book sound slight and whimsical, yet that it most emphatically is not. The spirits and green-haired girls that inhabit this book do so on exactly the same terms as the politicians, revolutionaries and military. Isabel Allende, grand-daughter of Chile's elected and deposed Marxist President, Salvadore Allende, has written a chilling political history of her country. Yet she has done so on magical realist terms, the magical and realistic elements of the plot interweave and in the end become crucially dependent upon each other. Characters behave as they do because they live with the spirits, commune with the dead, fall in love with a green-haired girl. This is not a question of the fantastic being grafted onto a realistic novel. The essence of this book, indeed of all magical realism, is that the real cannot be seen except through the eyes that see the fantastic also.

At the heart of the novel is Esteban Trueba, husband of the fey Clara, father of Blanca who loves his enemy Pedro Garcia Tercero, and grandfather of green-haired Alba. He begins the novel as the patronising patron of a run down estate in the south of the country. He rides roughshod over everyone, fathering bastards all over the place, and becomes immensely rich and powerful. Eventually, as a leading light in the Conservative Party (the party he believes destined by God to rule forever), he is the instigator of the coup that overthrows the Socialist President, kills one of his sons, and results in the torture of Alba. The first 300 pages of the book are full of character, colour and interest, but they are in the main slow moving and detached; then in the last 50 pages there is an abrupt change of pace as events bring about the military coup and torture of Alba. Here there is real fire and real pain, including some of the most powerful and gripping scenes I have read for along time. They are not for the faint-hearted.

Isabel Allende's greatest achievement, however, is the character of Esteban Trueba who, despite being seen frequently reflected through the eyes of the women in his family, is a massive and commanding character who dominates the book from beginning to end. It is a considerable imaginative achievement to see deeply into the heart of someone who represents everything the author must stand against. It is an even greater literary achievement to create so vast and loathsome a person and yet make us feel sorry for him when he gets his just desserts at the end.

The House Of The Spirits is a sprawling, monumental book that goes against everything I would normally consider good authorial practice - yet it works. It shows just how powerful fantasy can be when supplied with a judicious amount of muscle.

THE SCEPTRE MORTAL - Derek Sawde
[Oriflamme Publishing, 1985, 294pp, £2.95]
Reviewed by David V. Barrett

EVERY NOW AND THEN A FIRST NOVEL COMES along which is immediately recognised as an original work of startling quality, a brilliant debut.

This is nearly, but not quite, such a novel.

The immediate and obvious comparison is with **Lord Of The Rings**, so it is all the more gratifying that there is no mention of *LOTR* in the blurb - that in itself makes a change.

Three men from the Outer Worlds are summoned by the Allfather, "the first man that ever was of all Men". One, Melandir, is given the Sword of Fate, whose bearer cannot be harmed; another, Erathrir, is given Knowledge, which will come to him when needed; he and a third, Yeselwir, are also given the silver ring of the Old High King and the Imperial Standard of Wenyaltrir.

These three, and nine others, who include the Prince of Wenyaltrir, Elven Lords and Dwarves, are sent on a Quest by the High Magician Selenthoril, to find and recover the Sceptre Mortal, with which he can kill Ral, the Witch Queen. What they don't know is that the one who calls himself Selenthoril is actually the Hooded One, one of the Black Lords originally created by Ral, but who now want to destroy her. He is no reformed character; he is as evil as ever, but by the power of the Sceptre Spiritual he has illicitly acquired, he can make men see him as "fair to look upon, mighty in wisdom and magic".

The twelve split into three groups to give them a greater chance of surviving the many perils on their way to the Sceptre Mortal, and most of the rest of the story details their Quest. They find that they are not just fighting against the powers of Ral, but against the creatures of an older, still more evil being, Sagoth - the Devil himself. Their battles and adversities are suitably harrowing, and become even more so as the story leads to its climax.

This is an immensely complex and ultimately very satisfying novel. The basic story could be just another quest, but behind the quest, and the characters, some of them are thousands of years old, are layer upon layer of created mythology. History, religion and magic are interwoven in the background throughout the book, and all of it, in the end, is relevant to the story.

Why, then, the guarded accolade at the start of this review? With a novel as complex as this, the author must take steps to help the reader, to draw him in gradually, so that he is not overwhelmed by detail, and turned off before the story itself catches his interest. This is the main fault in the book. According to the publicity notice, the author was 21 years in the writing of it. In that time, he will have become totally familiar with his creation; each name will instantly conjure up the relevant mythological connections; each historical reference will easily find its place in the overall story.

It's not an easy book; it makes demands on its readers which some will be unwilling to meet. But if you're prepared to put some effort into reading a book - we all criticise the mindless dross that fills most fantasy shelves - the effort will definitely be repaid.

Unlike most publishers these day, Oriflamme are actively looking for first novels; I wish them (and their future authors!) every success. **The Sceptre Mortal** is one of the best fantasy novels I have ever read, but perhaps they were a little too over-confident in launching their publishing house with a work which - whatever its undoubted qualities - could never be described as easily accessible.

THE SUMMER TREE - Guy Gavriel Kay
[George Allen & Unwin, 1985, 323pp, £8.95]
Reviewed by Helen McNabb

THIS IS BOOK ONE IN THE FIONAVAR TAPESTRY, a trilogy of fantasy novels, but before you scream "Oh God, not another one!", let me tell you that it looks like a goodie. But I might recommend you wait until all three books are available because Kay leaves us teetering right at the cliff edge at the end of this one, so much so that I was bouncing up and down in frustration. Telling signs of a good story is if it has you gripped enough to make an effort to find out what happens, if the characters are real enough to make you care what becomes of them, and Kay has succeeded admirably with me in these respects, I want to know what happens so I will definitely be reading the two other books.

It starts mundanely enough with the five human protagonists, all students at the University of Toronto, attending a special lecture after which they are invited to the lecturer's hotel; but even in the first few pages it is obvious that things are not what they seem, and it comes as no surprise to the reader when Lorenzo Marcus reveals his name is Loren, and he is a mage from another world. He convinces them to come to his world on what he says will be a ceremonial visit, but the undercurrents and personalities of the five are already setting Loren's plans awry and one man, Dave, is lost in transit. The

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others arrive safely, but over the next few days learn that their roles are not merely ceremonial as they had been led to believe. They are quickly drawn into the complexities of Fionavar and become significant instead of symbolic. I won't go into more detail of the plot except to say it works well, partly because I don't want to spoil it and partly because until I've read the other two volumes I've only read a third of it myself and can't judge properly. This book doesn't stand as an independent entity.

Fionavar is interesting. There is a mixture of familiarity and strangeness in Kay's created world which is disconcerting. The existence of kings, mages, a vaguely William-Morrissy-medieval culture with dwarves, magic and nomadic horsemen is not unexpected in fantasy novels. The villain, Maugrim, an evil power outside time, locked into a mountain is at times like a shadow of Sauron; other echoes of Middle Earth are everywhere, making Kay's love of Tolkien's creation obvious, nevertheless it is not middle earth. Kay has drawn on many mythologies and his own imagination to create Fionavar, and the success or otherwise of his creation can't be judged by one part of it, so judgment must be suspended until the whole work is read. For the moment the Summer Tree of the title seems to hold out hope that Kay has created something individual, a tapestry instead of a patchwork. The tree is a real tree with great mystic power attached to it, it has elements of Yggdrasil, the Crucifix, the tree of life, but it is not any one of these things, if he can pull it off Kay offers the hope that the Summer Tree may be the original on which the other legends and myths are based.

It's a very well written book. It has people in it who love and cry and get confused and embarrassed. He has been ambitious with his characters, none of them are simple and straightforward, even the nicest of them have shades of darkness. Even in the most emotional passages - when Paul is on the Summer Tree or Jennifer with Maugrim - the writing is fluent, eloquent, evocative and economical. His prose is clear and uncluttered, extremely readable, capable of catching a description or a person in a well chosen phrase. He's not overly coy about sex as many writers are, fantasists often favour Romance and ignore desire, Kay covers the range from genuine loving and causal relations to rape and torture, none of it is gratuitous or obscene, even the torture is deftly handled so that her suffering is unmistakable but without dwelling on gory detail.

As you may have gathered I like the book. My reservations about its originality can't be resolved until I've read the rest of the trilogy, although I think I'd enjoy them even if they don't live up to the promise of this one. I hope Kay will develop the original elements and make the whole work into his book and his world, that he has managed to set up his own loom to weave his own unique tapestry, to use a metaphor from Fionavar itself. I recommend it, but if you don't like hanging about on cliff edges then wait till all three are available.

FISKADORO - Denis Johnson
[Chatto & Windus, 1985, 221pp, £9.50]
Reviewed by Martyn Taylor

THE APPROACH OF A NON-GENRE AUTHOR TO A staple SF topic can be enlightening, as Orwell proved. Denis Johnson has something of a reputation as a poet, and his first novel, **Angels**, was a well received American thriller. Certainly his simple, spare style with not a syllable of surplus fat has a poetic discipline, a welcome change in these logorrheic days.

Twicetown/Key West has escaped the holocaust and its menagerie of inhabitants live by the sea, by the generous land, and the scavengings of the past time. Normality as we might recognize it does not exist. Koran-quoting Cassius Clay Sugar Ray trades exotica from the contaminated areas and is rightly regarded as 'touched'. The boy Fiskadoro loses his father to the sea and then what little wits he had when a swamp people ritual sees him make himself as all other men are - by removing his genitalia with a sharp stone. The grandmother of Fiskadoro's clarinet teacher relives her escape from Saigon in the face of the Viet Cong. The teacher, Anthony Cheung, is suitably fatalistic when he finds he has co-opted the Miami Symphony Orchestra - of which he is Manager - to play at some arcane Rastafarian ritual while under the influence of Flying Man's weed of wisdom. Mother, a local seer, is concerned Mankind will regress to monkeydom before the Great God Bob Marley can come to redeem his flock.

Everybody and everything in this book floats in and out of a miasma of hallucinogen and agony, with little difference between objective 'reality' and dream. The feeling is very often reminiscent of those explorations of Latin American mysticism - echoes of Marquez and Castenada, thankfully rather than undigested gobbets. Can anyone be surprised when these characters are literally bombed out? After the End of the World what can anyone look forward to but the coming of the next? Which may happen at the end of the narrative, or may not, and this is my principal quarrel with Johnson. He creates his setting, establishes his characters and takes us through his plot in a convincing, creative way. I felt very much for all these characters and their various predicaments. Yet at the end, just when all the threads are tied, rather than give us the 'truth' he leaves us hanging in mid air on those threads. One of the signal characteristics of good SF is that when the concepts become difficult the writing becomes clear. Ultimately not so with Johnson, and that is a pity, because he gives the impression of not having been able to think of a conclusion to the story, so he just ended it.

If the ending is a weakness, Johnson's ear for speech is a definite strength. Grandmother is quitting Saigon, taking her mother too. Mother is a wealthy, multi-lingual Vietnamese who has "gone to sleep in her face" after the suicide of her husband and is very much a drag on Marie. At the most inconvenient moment she stops. "In English her mother said, "A fucking cigaret. Give - me - a fucking - light." Her eyes were curtained with hatred." Which is exactly how an Oxbridge drawl from such a woman would sound. From the educated Mr Cheung to a Jah talking Israelite, Johnson's dialogue is uniformly excellent.

Given the high quality of Johnson's prose choosing an illustrative passage is really a question of opening the book at any page. Here the emasculated Fiskadoro is being ferried back to Twicetown by a trader whose name has no sound. Fiskadoro believes he is living a dream as they pass by the Everglades highway packed with cars flashfried by Armageddon. "Every car - as the raft moved alongside them towards the clouds of buildings in the east - was being driven by a person made of brown bones who didn't shift or flicker or turn his head, but Fiskadoro knew they were all aware of him. There were riders in every car, big and little, twisted into different shapes, all made of brown bones. Now he understood that his purpose in this dream was to die."

Despite my reservations about the ending I am forced to the conclusion that in **Fiskadoro**, Denis Johnson has written a remarkably good book - one which establishes its own parameters and exists within them with no regard to the whims of fashion. As such it is a welcome addition to Chatto's growing catalogue of strong and stylish fantasies.

SOFTWARE - Rudy Rucker
[Penguin, 1985, 167pp, £1.95]
Reviewed by Terry Broome

SOFTWARE IS A VERY SHORT AND STYLISTICALLY simple novel. It jokingly alludes to many reading and media sources, including **2001** and Asimov's 'Robot' stories (as on page 58, where a robot , reflecting on the Three Laws, decides they are "ugly, human-chauvinist priorities").

Cobb Anderson, drunk inventor of the first free-thinking robots, is nearing the end of his life. The robots have rebelled, establishing their own base on the Moon. The more advanced, the "Big Boppers", have perfected a method of recording human personalities in an attempt to achieve union with "The One", an insubstantial "God". The recordings can be transferred to "remotes", extensions of the Big Boppers almost indistinguishable from human beings. Opposed to them are the smaller robots who believe the transfer process is evil and feel that their anarchistic state is threatened by the growing power of the Big Boppers.

Ralph Numbers, one of Cobb's original creations, promises Cobb immortality this way, but the Boppers have ulterior motives for the offer and events, not surprisingly considering their inefficiency and love of striking, take a bad turn.

Against Cobb and Ralph is a malicious, sadistic cop whose son, Sta-Hi, is a drug addict, and Wagstaff, a small Bopper who may have been partially modeled on Peter Lorre.

Rucker tries too hard for effect, with the result that **Software** is often shallow and gimmicky - a pity, as the author very obviously harbours a tremendous amount of talent. The Americanisms and SF elements sometimes get in the way, but the characters of Cobb and Sta-Hi are drawn slightly deeper than one would expect from a lightweight story. They don't learn anything from their adventures, but they do have moods, giving the impression Rucker deliberately portrayed them as incapable of change.

An amusing, sometimes perplexing book.

TIME FOR THE STARS (244pp)
THE DOOR INTO SUMMER (190pp)
- Robert A. Heinlein
[Gollancz, 1985, £8.95 each]
Reviewed by Mark Greener

G.K. CHESTERTON DEFINED THE GOOD-BAD NOVEL as a book that "makes no serious literary pretensions but remains readable when more serious productions have perished". These books, in deference to established criteria, have an indefinable, elusive quality that renders them eminently readable. The persistent, tenacious hold that Bond and Holmes have on the public imagination is indicative of this. Gollancz have re-issued two of Heinlein's Good-Bad novels originating in the 1950's.

Time For The Stars has a plot typical of the hard SF stories published in the fifties. The development of "Torch Ships", spaceships able to travel at almost the speed of light, has rendered normal telecommunications useless. However it is soon discovered that telepaths can communicate instantaneously over inter-stellar distances. Hence when man begins to colonise planets outside the solar system 'mind-

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readers' are employed to communicate with Earth. Telepaths are usually twins and one of the pair has to remain on Earth, albeit in luxury, while the other travels in space. As a result the latter remains young while his twin grows old. **Time For The Stars** is a chronicle of the adventures that befall Tom Bartlett, a young telepath, as he seeks out new worlds for man to conquer.

Time For The Stars has a certain naive, nostalgic charm. It is well written and easy to read although it is essentially shallow, transient and meaningless. It was obviously written with a teenage audience foremost in Heinlein's mind. The situations described in the book are allegories for the trials of youth. Heinlein makes an attempt at describing the psychological effects of telepathy and space-travel but these excursions are never developed. Heinlein also fails to develop the potentially interesting confrontation between the 'old' and 'young' twin. It is the lack of a detailed exploration of the psychological aspects of the plot that prevents the book rising above the juvenile.

The Door Into Summer involves another classic SF device - time travel. Dan Davis is an inventor who is swindled out of his share in a company which makes robots. He confronts his ex-partners but they overpower him and he is held in suspended animation for thirty years. When he awakes he finds himself in a world very different from the one he left. To add to his confusion he finds himself trapped in a complex web of inexplicable coincidences. Davis decides his only option is to return to the past and resolve his problems at their source.

The above distillation of the plot of **The Door Into Summer** cannot hope to do the book justice. The plot is extremely convoluted and to detail all of the twists and turns would ruin the book for any potential readers. However the plot is constructed in such a way that the problem of time paradoxes is minimised and in spite of the meandering nature of the novel it manages to maintain its internal logic and consistency.

Like **Time For The Stars, The Door Into Summer** is very well written. However the latter book is a more mature novel and as a result is more enjoyable. Heinlein's technical virtuosity allows him to write with a consummate skill that eases the reader over the imperfections in the plot which would have otherwise destroyed the illusion the book creates. As a result of his skill the imperfections are only revealed upon reflection.

Heinlein was perhaps the most influential SF writer to emerge from the Golden Age, but he is a technophile whose obsession with technology over-shadows any socio-political changes that would result from the technological developments he describes. Indeed **The Door Into Summer** is set after a nuclear war in a society that is little different from America circa 1950. Heinlein based these stories on logical extrapolations from the context of the 1950's and as such these books are rapidly degenerating into anachronisms. From the viewpoint of the eighties both these books can only be considered as lightweight and escapist; SF's archetypal Good-Bad novels.

BANQUETS OF THE BLACK WIDOWERS
- Isaac Asimov
[Granada, 1985, 212pp, £8.95]
Reviewed by Tom A. Jones

THIS ISN'T A SCIENCE FICTION BOOK AND IF IT wasn't by Isaac Asimov you wouldn't be seeing a review in **Vector**. What we have is twelve mystery stories all based on The Black Widowers Club. Nine appeared in 'Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine' ('EQMM'), two were written for this collection and one was rejected by 'EQMM' - Asimov gives his reasons why - and is thus printed here for the first time.

Each story is based around the same framework, a deliberate ploy by Mr Asimov and 'EQMM'. Basically The Black Widowers are a small dining club of intelligent men who meet once a month. One member is allowed to bring a guest who has to pay a 'price' for his dinner which is to answer any questions which may be asked of him. Inevitably this leads to some mystery being recounted which the members then try to solve. Again, invariably Henry, the butler, and a de facto member of the club, actually solves the mystery.

I've used the male pronouns throughout as members and guests have to be male. One story, 'The Good Samaritans', has a female 'guest' and a portion of the story deals with the problems this causes. I'm not sure why this part of the formula was chosen, perhaps it accurately represents this type of American club. Sorry for this sidetrack but I have a thing against prejudices (whether in life or literature) whether about race or gender.

Let me say that I am not of that school of reviewers which automatically seems to disparage all established Big Name Authors, in particular Asimov, Heinlein and Clarke. I think I've read most of Asimov's SF novels, most of them about 20 years ago, and I think it was **Pebble In The Sky** which convinced me they were all very much the same, well most of them anyway. But at the time I enjoyed **Caves Of Steel** and the **Foundation Trilogy**. I wish also to note that I reread 'Nightfall' about two years ago and I still found it a powerful, well written story - on of SF's few classics.

Whilst not being a mystery fan I do read the occasional mystery/detective story, indeed I believe Martin Cruz Smith's **Gorky Park** is one of the best novels written in the last ten years.

I've put in this preamble because I didn't enjoy this book. Even if each story had been enjoyable, twelve of them at one sitting would have been too much. I don't actually understand why these stories were written, I assume it's so the readers can try and work out the solution before it's revealed. Presumably 'EQMM' have a readership for them as they continue to commission them, but it isn't me.

I did work a few out, but not consciously, so either they were simple or any necessary additional facts were already stored in my memory cells. But some I would defy anyone to solve, as an example let me take 'The Driver'. This requires that you know the Russian pronunciation of Plato and that you automatically associate his name with the word 'symposium' (sorry if this spoils the story for you). This is the story rejected by 'EQMM' and I think they did it because it was obscure rather than for the reason Asimov gives.

Each story has an afterword and these I found interesting as they gave an insight into Asimov's writing and submitting processes.

For those of you who believe stories require characterisation, don't look for it in this book. Although the club members are based on real people they didn't come alive for me, even after twelve stories I couldn't tell who was who, except for Henry. But character isn't really important in these stories which are more an intellectual game than literature.

I let Susan, my wife, read the book as she is much more into mysteries and detective stories than I am. With the exception of the obscure tales she thought they would have been okay read one at a time as part of a magazine. I still can't recommend the book to you, though.

SWASTIKA NIGHT - Katharine Burdekin
[Lawrence and Wishart, 1985, 196pp, £3.95]
Reviewed by L.J. Hurst

SWASTIKA NIGHT WAS PUBLISHED UNDER THE pseudonym 'Murray Constantine' in 1937 and republished in 1940. It is mentioned under the entry 'Constantine, Murray' in the **Encyclopedia Of Science Fiction**, although the detail there is slightly inaccurate. Otherwise the book had disappeared until last year. Its reappearance is just as worthy of attention as the book itself, because the book has been taken over.

In 1984, Daphne Patai got hold of it and used it as a feminist alternative to Orwell's **Nineteen Eighty-Four**. From her, Andy Croft wrote about it in a bibliographical essay in Christopher Norris's **Inside The Myth. Orwell: Views From The Left.** Croft showed that a lot of unacknowledged political SF-oriented work was written in the 1930's and 1940's; he argued that **Nineteen Eighty-Four** was nothing special, and called **Swastika Night** "the most sophisticated and original of the many anti-fascist dystopias of the late 1930's and 1940's". This seems to have encouraged Lawrence and Wishart, who published the Norris collection, to re-print the novel with an introduction by Daphne Patai.

Burdekin set her novel in the twenty-sixth century. Germany and Japan rule the world: within the Reich all non-Aryans have been exterminated, and the soil is tilled by solid German peasantry who worship the god Hitler. Men and women are strictly separated, with women reduced to near-moronic slave status, kept in camps for breeding purposes, shaven-headed and wrecked. A stocky British yeoman (actually an aircraft engineer), Arthur, visits his friend Hermann, in Germany, is initiated by Hermann's feudal lord into a secret - that Hitler was human, and that perhaps the extremes of Nazism were too extreme - and is passed a true, secret history of the world. Arthur returns to England with the book and, before being kicked to death by the SS, passes its secrets on to his son. Shortly before his death, as well, Arthur has visited his regular partner in her camp (marriage, like socialism, is a thing forgotten) and decides not to be rude to her in future.

The survival of the son and the choice of politeness lead Patai to write about "Orwell's despair, Burdekin's hope". But the main purpose of the novel is to show the effects of sexual segregation. It is done perfectly credibly. But Patai provides disturbing evidence of the abuses to which 'feminist SF' can be subject: to her, the subjugation of the Nazi women is so important (because they are women) that the extermination of the Jews of both sexes which Burdekin mentions is not worthy of reference. And in her praise for the novel Patai is also prepared to remain silent about the major flaw in **Swastika Night**

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- that it is violently anti-homosexual. All the Nazis are misogynists, most of them are gay, and many of them prefer little boys - not only paederasts, but paedophiles. Burdekin's sophistication did not stop her using homosexuality as an automatic disqualification from humanity. She used an ultimate cliche to prove the villainy of the Nazis, and Patai does nothing to correct the slander, although she must know that gender played no part in going to the gas chambers.

Croft and Patai compare Orwell unfavourably with Burdekin, saying Orwell wrote a book influenced by "a gender ideology that he fully supports" - it has taken a long time to discover that Orwell was a Nazi! But what would Croft or Patai make of Dick's **Man In The High Castle** or Spinrad's **Iron Dream**! Spinrad, with no evidence of having read Burdekin, brilliantly shows fascism as a sexual aberration, woman-hating, leather-loving. He manages to arrive at the same conclusion in his novel as the feudal lord of **Swastika Night**, that Nazism results in sterility. But such a novel by a man does not fit Patai's thesis. And she ignores the fact that the principle novels today in which characters spend hours and pages in conversation about sexual subjugation are those of John Norman and Sharon Green, all of whose arguments are in favour of it.

Burdekin's is an interesting novel, expanding the range of alternative worlds, a major expansion of women's role in SF. The rediscovery of the novel has been an act of misappropriation. That is my complaint.

THE DREAM YEARS - Lisa Goldstein
[Bantam, 1985, 181pp, $13.95]
Reviewed by Martyn Taylor

LISA GOLDSTEIN'S SECOND NOVEL DEPICTS 'real' people - if the first surrealists could ever be described as real - and a fictitious companion flitting back and forth between Paris in 1924, Paris in 1968 and some future Paris. The initial thesis - that the thrust of the 'revolutionary' movements of the 1960's requires surrealism to come to fruition - is intriguing. The sub-plot of the hero's pantemporal love affair with a woman of 1968 is also interesting and well depicted - if a little too 'Cosmo' at times. The consummation of the plot, with the transported surrealists escaping mundanity through a silent movie and fighting off the future forces of industrial society with concretised dreams is excellent - gripping, amusing, tragic in places, and knitting together all the threads of the plot. Why, then, don't I like this novel? I want to like it. Perhaps I ought to like it. There are passages which will have me searching Ms Goldstein's first and future novels. BUT...

The cover superimposes Magritte's famous cloudman on Paris past and future. Mediocre cover, cliched, ignoring the fact that Magritte is very associated with London. As a marketing ploy it is crass, at best.

The early surrealists were French, living in Paris, speaking French. You might not guess as much from **The Dream Years**, which gives no indication of Paris except for cliches - the cafe, the street market, the crowded cinema - everything you've seen in the movies. Not only that, the characters speak in almost fluent modern idiomatic American and the language of the narrative is often ludicrously inappropriate - "Suddenly a group of people - kids, really - ran around the corner toward the barricade. Helmeted men followed, so holding guns... Policemen? Robert thought incredulously... The kids made it to the barricade and leapt over. One of them was left on the ground, his right leg splayed outward at an unnatural angle. Blood started to seep through the pants.". As a French veteran of the Great War, Robert wouldn't call gendarmes 'policemen', would know a pistol from a gun and even he would be shocked to see a young goat wearing women's underclothes in public! In a novel about modern America there would be nothing wrong with that passage apart from its crudity, but for a 1920's Parisian?

In the movie 'Nicholas and Alexandra' there is a scene where Michael Bryant approaches an actor in heavy black hair and wire rimmed spectacles and says "Trotsky you've been avoiding me.". (Bryant played Lenin) What's wrong with that? Apart from the fact he would have addressed him as 'Lev Davidovitch', not a lot, given the exigencies of a 90 minute movie. But Ms Goldstein has written a novel in that manner, ignoring all the manifold opportunities for characterisation afforded by the form. Like so many contemporary novels **The Dream Years** reads like a development for a movie, a novelisation, only she doesn't even bother to do the set dresser's work for them, relying on the prior knowledge of the reader to supply the settings. For a novel which would cost £12 in Britain that just isn't good enough.

Perhaps Ms Goldstein's worst crime is to have reduced one of the most gorgeously apparelled artistic movements to a few idle young men posing and squabbling in cafes. The fictitious hero describes them as "... a major literary and artistic movement." but what does the reader see of that creativity, or their "shocking" social behaviour? All we see are vain young men, dependent on their parents' largesse, indulging their ennui over orange curacao. The 'revolutionaries' Ms Goldstein portrays are about as revolutionary as lard. Her 1968 scenes convey nothing of the breathless, fragile possibilities of that time that I remember. We are told of those fabulous possibilities at third hand, from a safe distance. Only when she moves into the future does the writing and description really take wing, giving us real characters and literally fantastic action.

I find this novel annoyingly disappointing. It could be fine, in places it is , but for the most part Ms Goldstein's ability falls woefully short of her ambition, that failure being the more starkly accentuated by those few successes. As Arte Johnson once said, "Very interesting, but..."

DAYWORLD - Philip Jose Farmer
[Granada, 1985, 322pp, £9.95]
Reviewed by Ken Lake

THE ONE THING THAT IS ABSOLUTELY ESSENTIAL in any straightforward SF novel is that the reader should be able so to suspend his disbelief that the author's invented world becomes acceptable.

To achieve this effect, not only should any seeming anomalies be explained and justified, but they should be seen to be essential to the plot or to the completeness of the reader's world-picture. I am afraid that in this book, Farmer fails to obtain my suspension of disbelief, and that for two reasons.

Here we have a superb concept: at any time, only one-seventh of the world's population - in this case, specifically the population of New York in the year 3414 AD - are functioning as living people; the other six-sevenths are in a state of suspended animation, thus allowing seven times as many people to use the same homes and facilities. (Parenthetically one does not learn how this sevenfold population is fed, save that vast areas of formerly unusable land is gradually becoming arable - the question of who actually husbands that land is not explained).

Arising out of his short story 'The-Sliced-Crosswise-Only-On-Tuesday-World' (author's hyphens), the plot concerns Jeff Caird, a "daybreaker" - he does not "stone" himself after his Monday life, but substitutes a plastic blow-up replica in his "stoner" and, through long exercise of his blazing schizophrenia, takes on a new persona for each day of the week. This not being enough, he is also an "immer" - in effect, a chemically-induced immortal, capable of living seven days a week for eons, thanks to his being a descendant of the treatment's inventor. Immers are, of course, not only illegal, but form a freemasonry permeating all levels of government worldwide to safeguard their secret.

Yes, pretty melodramatic stuff, but still acceptable in the school of hyper-adventure SF. But what use does Farmer make of this superb invented world? Answer: he writes a run-of-the-mill crime thriller, replete with chase sequences, shootouts on the streets (and this is in a New York where murder is virtually unknown and where his personal statistics will distort those of the city about tenfold!). And that's the first point at which my belief takes a fall: with a little ingenuity, I'm sure the whole sordid tale could have been told outside the SF field altogether - and with a great deal more verisimilitude at that.

My second and more obvious stumbling block arises out of Farmer's inability to remain serious about his own invention. Naturally street names are changed - though only patchily, which I found perplexing. But renaming Broadway, "Womansway" is just too twee for words!

But, you say, that can't turn up all that frequently. True, but when we come to characters, we find that men's and women's first names have become interchangeable. As a plot device this would be fascinating, but although Farmer refers to the practice in his introductory notes, he makes no attempt to justify it and the actual plot in no way hinges upon this unnerving trick.

Unnerving? Sure: not only are names applied willy-nilly, they are sprung on you without warning and they are often downright silly: I don't think I could ever acclimatise to a "nude, golden-coppery, willowy, kinky-haired and beautiful" woman whose ancestry is "American mulatto, Afrikaans and Samoan" (whose hangups are on display here, I wonder?)... and whose name is Rupert von Hentzau!

There are other annoying infelicities, such as the protagonist's habit of stopping the action to debate inwardly 'what if' from time to time, and the sheer juvenilia of the author's development (or lack of it, actually) of the character of the major antagonist, who believes he is God and acts like Jack the Ripper with no good reason. But unfortunately, Farmer even starts off by discouraging the reader: the first page of the story (page 13) is badly written, simplistic, ungrammatical and fails to grip. Once the story get into its stride - even two pages later - it's well enough crafted, but the poor start is inexcusable from a writer of Farmer's experience; it's as though he rewrote it so many times he lost all confidence in his own structure and ended up saying 'the hell with it, nobody's going to notice'. Unfortunately we do, we do, and it makes the reader's first contact with the plot as unsatisfying and unconvincing as do the last couple of pages. Here, some one and a half millennia in the future, we still have psychiatrists (she is called a "psychist" but this is not interpreted in any way, and her activities seem best suited to the current and long-discredited practices of psychiatry).

And our psychist is so naive that,

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knowing that Caird has created seven totally separate and independent personae, and broken them down again when forced by circumstances to do so, she is incapable of working out the final plot twist: Caird disguises from the world all his plans for escape by burying them in a new, eighth persona whose sole function is to plan and carry out this escape (which we are merely promised, not shown).

After all this, I suppose it's carping to say that the dustwrapper artwork appears to bear absolutely no relevance whatsoever to anything in the story, and that with more space-saving typesetting and a typeface somewhat smaller than the 'books for the blind' face used here, this slim volume could have been printed in the form best suited to its content - as half of an Ace double. Sorry: this is a thoroughly disappointing misuse of a fine invention; one can only hope that Farmer will (as he so often does) re-use it in future books which will have a plot worthy of the conception.

THE THIRD MILLENIUM: A HISTORY OF THE WORLD: AD 2000 - 3000
- Brian Stableford and David Langford
[Sidgwick & Jackson, 1985, 214pp, £12.95]
Reviewed by Geoff Ryman

THIS BOOK IS ACE. IT'S FUN, IT'S SMART, it's terrifying. It's the first book I've read in a long time that administers that most salutary and refreshing of jolts - a convincing glimpse into the future.

It's a future history, written by Stableford and Langford as if in the year 3000, looking back at developments of the previous thousand years.

What makes their account so special is the convincing interaction of technology, ecology, human greed and the totally unexpected. It begins by answering in some detail the most immediate question: how do we avoid nuclear war? This best-possible scenario mixes technical limitations - satellite weapons made obsolete by cruise missiles - with optimistic political speculation - the USA and the USSR find themselves unexpectedly united by their mutual need to control the Third World and other nuclear nations.

Other key problems are worked through - ecological and economic crises - and then on, to bioengineered houses that recycle water and photosynthesise energy for domestic use, new organisms that retrieve rusted and dispersed metal from the soil, the resurgence of "inorganic engineering", the genetic re-moulding of humankind, and finally - after a decent interval in which the world sorts out its problems - the revival of space exploration.

Some of the more interesting twists and turns: Italy and Ireland are flooded with immigrants wishing to avoid enforced birth control. Men obsessed with cosmetics and genetic re-moulding in order to attract a woman who will consent to bear a child. The world electricity grid is, paradoxically, a drain on the energy resources of the poorer countries.

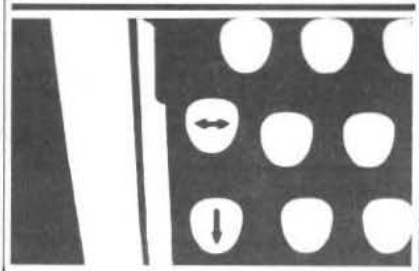
It does seem to me that future historians would have more to say about the centuries closest to their own rather than ours. I wish an over-all time scheme had been provided to help keep track of how all this fits together. The step-by-step gaining of power by the UN, even if by accident, seems to me to be the most pious of hopes. Not every single one of the book's ideas are new.

It ought by rights to read like a background appendix to a trilogy. Instead it reads like something brand new. You get good ideas in bad stories. Yet get good ideas isolated within a story that ignores all the developments that would be part of the same network of change. You get good SF in good stories but the two of them - story and SF speculation - don't really have that much to do with each other. By simply setting aside accumulated story-telling conventions and giving us the speculation, hot and strong, the writers appear to have solved most of the problems of writing SF.

This is also the first special effects book. Almost as important as the text are the luxurious illustrations. Forget the holograms on the cover, look at the faked photographs of a colony on the world of Maya, of the mer-people, of airships dusting the Sahara with the spores of "binder organisms". Not all the special effects are convincing, but there is great wit in the occasionally cut-price solutions the book finds to the problems of showing us the future. Grass on top of lamb chops is photographed as a bioengineered feast. A photograph of an anonymous couple at the beach is captioned as a papparazzi snap of two famous scientists.

Possibilities are played with as if they were mudpies. But underneath the fun is a lot of thought, imagination and caring. The book is utterly sobering in the way it makes plain that even its happy endings involve the death of millions of people - from new diseases, new weapons, from ecological and cultural disruptions. Its prophecy that the world will only feed itself by dispossessing and destroying the peasant cultures of the world is unanswerable. It goes out of its way to make sure we understand, amid the fun, what is coming.

Any serious attempt to imagine the future faces you with the certainty that you, your friends, and all you believe in will be wiped away. There is an insidious comfort in the idea that there is no future, that we are the last word. This book restores the future as a place to be lived in, worked for, and above all else to be tolerated by us - those it will displace. This book, for all its charm, opens up the chasm of time beneath your feet. The effect is giddying, thrilling and also unnerving.



IN MILTON LUMKY TERRITORY - Philip K. Dick
[Gollancz, 1985, 213pp, £8.95]
Reviewed by Paul Kincaid

MILTON LUMKY TERRITORY IS PHILIP K. DICK territory. A small town in the mid-west in the mid-fifties - or to be more accurate, Boise, Idaho in 1956. What's more, the focus of the novel is a small typewriter shop, giving free rein to Dick's perennial fascination with shops and salesmen. It must be redundant here to run through the familiar litany of how brilliant Philip K. Dick was, so I will content myself by saying that this is not his best work but occupies that solid middle ground of achievement that can only arouse the envy of most other writers. While the fact that here he has devoted an entire book to the themes and settings that have cropped up in the background of so many of his other novels is particularly fascinating.

Bruce 'Skip' Stevens is a buyer for a large discount store. On a purchasing trip back to his old home town he meets Susan Faine, once his high school teacher and now co-owner of an ailing typewriter shop. She persuades him to come in with her, and the two fall in love and get married. Then traveling salesman Milton Lumky arrives on the scene, and Bruce heads off with him on a trip through Milton Lumky territory to find stock for his shop. It is a trip that is going to have a devastating effect on the shop, his marriage, and his self-image.

Dick opens the book with a brief foreword:

> "This is actually a very funny book, and a good one, too, in that the funny things that happen, happen to real people who come alive. The ending is a happy one. What more can an author say? What more can he give?"

This is, to say the least, disingenuous. It is a good book, and it is funny, but not riotously so. The precision of the characterisation and the ordinariness of the situation are going to generate a slightly uneasy smile rather than a belly laugh. An uneasy smile because there are some very telling moral points at the heart of this novel. Stevens is a superb creation, easily on a par with Timothy Archer, someone who is happiest alone on the road. He has, without realising it, worked out an efficient and anti-social lifestyle for himself; and marriage and Milton Lumky between them upset that in ways he couldn't have anticipated. He also has the ethics of a salesman, with no other thought than making a buck, and unable to see anything wrong in cheating someone if he has been cheated himself. The ruthless stripping away of Stevens' personality during the final third of the novel is a brilliant piece of work that clearly demonstrates why Dick attracts such extravagant praise.

I am somewhat less happy with the other main character, Susan. Women never fared well in Dick's novels until he created Angel in **The Transmigration Of Timothy Archer**, his last book. Although there is nothing to say so, this is clearly one of those mainstream novels that started to be unearthed when **Confessions Of A Crap Artist** appeared in 1975, and although Susan is one of his better female characters there is something not quite right about her. She is mercurial, shifting, uncertain; quite rightly, Stevens cannot get to grips with her, but neither can the reader.

In passing, I should also say that Dick's claim that the ending is happy is also disingenuous. It could be read that way, but it is just as valid to see it as wishful thinking by Stevens when at his lowest ebb.

Dick writes in a flat, deadpan style. He writes in short, simple, direct statements, without any frills or flowers. It is rather hard-edged prose that doesn't allow the reader to become absorbed in it, but leaves him always somehow in the position of observer. I have never read a Philip K. Dick novel that sucked me into the story from the first page, and this is no exception; but the eventual impression created lasts a lot longer than other more readily accessible books. Watching the bright and brittle surface of one of his tales, I always find it is a film of ice which I can see through into the depths below. I am always the observer, there is always that hard surface separating us, yet watching what happens fascinates and enthralls me. In this book I found the ice perhaps a little thicker than usual, but once I saw through to the depths I found it every bit as enthralling as usual.