VECTOR

136

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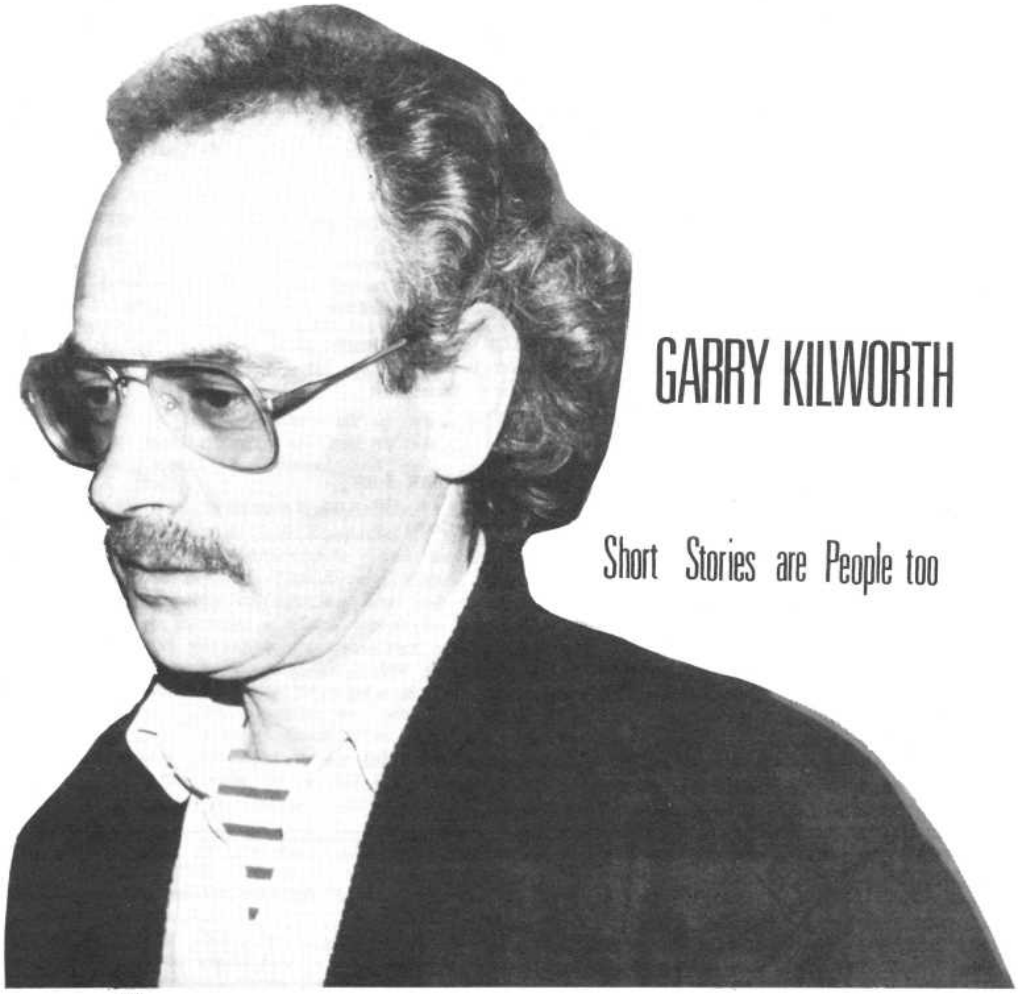

GARRY KILWORTH

Short Stories are People too

Plus

Benford on Hoyle

The Ghost in the Pen

Letters & Book Reviews

FEBRUARY MARCH 1987

VECTOR
1·3·6

FEBRUARY MARCH 1987

C O N T E N T S

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EDITORIAL

DAVID V BARRETT

You read a novel on a long train journey, or in an evening or three. By the following week you may have forgotten most of the characters' names and much of the plot. (Obviously there are some books whose impact stays with you for years; but these are very much the minority.) Because of our insatiable appetite for the printed word, we all read far more than we could really take in, if every book we read were a masterpiece. But because of this same appetite, we all read a certain amount of crap or (see the continuing debate in the Letters column) perhaps I should I call it meretricious garbage.

How often does it strike you that the book you've just finished, whether it is garbage or a masterpiece, was written by a person, sitting at a table day after day after day, or night after night after night, for months upon end, the pen scrawling and pausing, or the typewriter or word-processor keys clittering and faltering, with the baby crying and the washing up not done and the red versions of electricity and gas and telephone and rates bills piling up on the mantlepiece?

Books take time to write, whether they are fiction or non-fiction. So do short stories. It took me seven years of evenings and weekends to write two and a half novels and a handful of short stories. I thought this was just me, until I began to discuss the difficulties of writing with professional authors. One, like me, took seven years to produce two published novels, taking a degree at the same time. Another, when I asked what he was working on now, said "Nothing." "What? You can't be not writing!" "It always takes me a couple of years after finishing one book before I can get up the strength to begin the next," he said.

Writing takes time. It also, as any of us who has tried knows, takes a great deal of effort. And it consumes vast amounts of physical, mental, emotional and spiritual energy. Writing drains you.

Most writers *have to* write. It's a compulsion. Some call it an illness. Chris Evans, in *Vl19*, compared it to "a cross between pregnancy and drug addiction". And nearly all writers seem to find the most difficult part about it actually starting. The difficulty of sitting down at the desk, picking up the pen or putting a blank sheet in the typewriter, and starting to put words on paper.

Radio 4's *My Word!* examined the problem a few months ago. It isn't just confined to those strange creatures, modern day science fiction writers. Famous authors of the past had their methods of forcing themselves to get started. Disraeli would only write when in full evening dress. Victor Hugo wrote in the nude; he handed his clothes to a servant so there was no way he could go out until he'd finished his daily stint.

Dylis Powell, when asked on *My Word!* how she dealt with the problem, replied: "When I was a very young journalist, people would come up to one and say, 'How lovely to be able to sit down and write!' It's absolute hell sitting down to write. It's absolute torture... The only thing is to put something down, whether it's right or wrong. Put it down. And then sometimes, from somewhere, another word, or two words, or perhaps even three words, which is marvellous, will come. *But let's face it, it's absolute torture. There's no way of doing it, except doing it.*"

Frank Muir was asked how he stimulated "what some, who don't actually do it, would grandly call 'the creative impulse.'"

"It's not like that at all. Not if you're a professional writer, it just isn't like that. Like someone making something out of wood or stone, you're a workman trying terribly hard to be a craftsman. Getting going in the morning the secret is to either dirty the page the night before, with just a few words, or to think your first six words before you get up in the morning, so that you don't have an absolutely blank page. But it's nothing to do with creativity, it's how to pick up the shovel."

Picking up the shovel is essential if your creativity is to produce concrete results -- i.e. if you're ever going to write anything.

Sometimes a writer is lucky: after the first few sentences or paragraphs, the Muse takes over, and the words flow. Sometimes. But by no means always. Often you have to fight to get every single word down on paper. To correct a common misconception, if the words pour out it doesn't necessarily mean you're writing wonderful creative prose straight from the soul; you're as likely to be producing unstructured, ungrammatical, self-indulgent garbage. (I look back at my early stream-of-consciousness poetry and shudder.) If you have to struggle it doesn't necessarily mean that what you're writing is laboured and artificial; you're as likely to be producing something that's properly planned, with a careful choice of language, and that communicates to the reader.

Two of the articles I've written in the last few months about computer companies were sheer hell to produce. I found the writing boring and difficult. I'd write a paragraph, spend a couple of hours on other work, then write another paragraph. My writing was utterly flat, uninspired and uninspiring. I had to fight for every telling phrase, every spot of colour, even to make the sentences flow. I dragged those articles kicking and screaming into the world, word by bloody word. I dropped them on the editor's desk swearing by every deity I know never to do another company profile.

I got letters about those articles, saying they were well-crafted, interesting and informative. I read them again, and they were. They were good, professional pieces of journalism. Without the effort I was forced to put into them, they would have been no better than average. (Mind you, I'd have preferred it if I'd got something out of the *writing* of them.)

Sticking with non-fiction for a moment, though I believe the same does apply to fiction to some extent, it doesn't become miraculously easier when you know your subject inside out. It becomes more difficult. It's much easier to write when you're finding out about the subject you're writing about; as you write you learn; your writing becomes a process of discovery. Those journalists who flog different rewrites of the same article to several magazines may save themselves research time and effort, but they make their writing job itself much more difficult.

It does apply to fiction as well: there's nothing to beat the surprise when events you hadn't foreseen work their way into the novel you're writing, or when characters suddenly take it into their heads to get up to things you hadn't dreamt they would do. When things go right, you *know* there is no greater pleasure.

Sometimes it *is* possible to write the first draft of a novel or a short story in a white heat, and it can be fun. But that's not the draft you send to the publisher. Now the *real* hard work begins, the crafting and pruning and editing and rewriting and making sure that every word is the right word. And, again, that takes time.

A novel can take years to write, from the initial impulse to the final draft. There are exceptions, of course; early Michael Moorcock for one. "The Runestaff books originally took three days each, the *Eternal Champion* took three days (the original was 18 hours, and it certainly shows), but since there was no point doing them that quickly, and I was simply exhausting myself, I slowed down to seven or ten days." (*Vortex Vol 1 No 4*, April 1977). Quite. That rate of writing *is* exceptional, and as Moorcock says in the same interview, "Also I'm a very fast typist." But I doubt whether anyone, including Moorcock, would argue that these are quality novels. He's written much better since, and I bet it took him longer...

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There used to be hack Western writers (maybe there still are) whose publishers would phone up on a Friday asking for a couple more novels, and who would disappear off into the hills for the weekend, delivering two completed MSS first thing Monday morning.

Do hack writers find it easier? There are well-known and respected SF writers who churn out pseudonymous commissioned work in addition to their few own-name novels. Half the crap you find on the SF shelves in large stationers is probably written by people whose admitted works you admire. It's often the only way they can keep a roof over their heads and bread on the table. It brings in (relatively) quick money. But why is it so much quicker to produce genre hack work? It's probably because such stuff is not *of* the author; it doesn't come screaming from the soul as word by word it is bled upon the paper; the author has not gone through the torment of literary pregnancy and childbirth.

And that's why such books tend to be instantly forgettable.

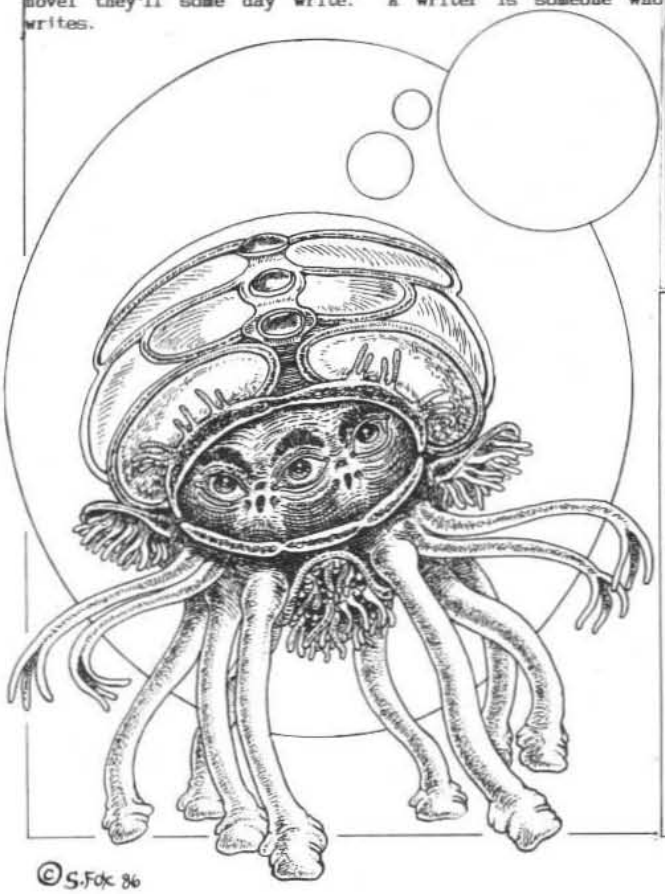
Quality takes effort. Samuel R Delany reckons it took him a minimum of six weeks of full-time writing to produce each short story in that classic collection, *Driftglass*. Writing takes time, and it's damn hard work. To quote Frank Muir again, this time from *Wogan* on BBC1 just after Christmas: "No-one would be a writer by choice: it's a boring, lonely, terrible job."

In the manner of "Don't put your daughter on the stage Mrs Worthington", I have heard professional writers begging young hopefuls not to take it up. But still people want to be writers. *Cassandra* magazine, the BSFA's own *Orbiter* postal workshops, and Writers' Circles in most towns bear witness to this.

Writers have to write. It *is* a compulsion, an addiction, an illness. And if you have to, you will.

In which case, the sooner you get down to it, the better. Don't say "I want to be a writer." Don't just talk about it. *Do it.* And do it now, not in six months time.

Because a writer isn't someone who dreams about the novel they'll some day write. A writer is someone who writes.



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WITH REFERENCE TO YOUR EDITORIAL IN *V134* CONCERNING YOUR criticism of Anne McCaffrey and her writing, having just completed an excellent book, *The Crystal Singer* I was outraged that one in such an esteemed position as yourself could casually write her off as "twee" and "repetitious"; this could influence a great many new readers with your singular view. Although she is a commercially viable writer, and why not, she is after all a professional writer and as such gets paid for her output as most professionals expect to.

As you have probably guessed I am what you would term as one of "Them". If it were not for people like McCaffrey, Heinlein, Herbert and Simak, I would probably not even be reading SF.

Your remark about "Us", meaning you, driving "Them", me and people similar to me, away from your subscription: you shall not however do this to me as I like your publication even though you constantly criticise my favoured authors and praise the more obscure, less commercial group.

By the way, it is relevant that a great many readers enjoy McCaffrey's books, not as you said, "She's also, in passing, brought a great deal of pleasure to a great many readers. But then, that's irrelevant, isn't it?" It most certainly isn't.

BRYAN S COLLINS
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«I'd thought I'd made my clearly far too subtle irony somewhat obvious; in fact, it was oozing sarcasm. Just for the record, I don't *think it's irrelevant that people get pleasure from reading McCaffrey. That was the point of the whole Editorial. On the same subject, Terry Broome has some thoughts on McCaffrey, and on reading and reviewing in general.»*

YOU RAISED A FEW POINTS IN YOUR EDITORIAL (*V134*). I AGREE with you up to a certain point on criticism. I thoroughly enjoyed McCaffrey's *Dragon* series, for example, but I *did* criticise *Killashandra*. I didn't do so because McCaffrey's successful and I despise success — I don't. I also enjoyed *The Ship Who Sang* and *Get off the Unicorn*. I had reservations about *Restoree*, stronger reservations about *The Crystal Singer* and didn't get on with the sequel at all: the quality of writing was not up to the standard of the Pern series and the plot was old and tired. Moreover, the story's romantic element showed no advancement in treatment from that in *Restoree* (no maturing of the treatment of the stuff of love) and did not advance Killashandra's character beyond that already portrayed in *The Crystal Singer* (a sequel should always attempt to expand on familiar characters). By advancement in treatment, I mean something

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in the writing to indicate a maturing of ideas or a willingness to re-explore those ideas in a new or different way, instead of treading the safe and worn path already marked out in the previous work. There's nothing wrong in taking this same path, but it differentiates between a merely competent (but otherwise unexciting) read and an excellent read, and very frequently a bad read. In my opinion *The Crystal Singer* was mediocre for this reason, and *Killashandra* bad. When all is said, it is just my opinion, but I hope one that is responsible, that goes some way to ensure reasonable standards in SF literature are maintained.

The level of concentration required for books like *The Bridge* by Iain Banks is much greater than that needed for, say, Simak (who is, by the way, still one of my favourite authors). This information about required concentration levels is present, I think, in all the BSFA reviews. The reader is told if she or he buys, for example, *The Bridge*, s/he's in for a deeply involved read, and if they buy the latest "Dumarest" by Tubb, for a more relaxing read (I'd enjoy both). What the reviewer may personally think of the book is entertaining, but I've never regarded it as the word of God and I wonder if anyone else in the BSFA does.

I've never seen an "us" or "them" in regards SF, except to feel annoyed when someone comes along who doesn't like SF and pulls it to pieces without actually having read any. There seems to be a widespread dislike for *Interzone* even among fans, but when asked if they've read any of the stories, the answer is often "No" or "Only from the first two issues", and their dislike may be due to trying to read stories above the level on which they are capable of concentrating (I'm dissatisfied with a few of the stories, but these seemingly lack plots, themes or character advancement, whereas I refer to the stories which have all these and are criticised because of the demanding style they are written in). In reviewing these stories I'd necessarily impart something of their reading difficulty. I am usually very pleased with *IZ*.

Yes, I've outgrown Heinlein, still like some Asimov (though not much these days) and lap up Vance. Asimov makes good reading for children and young adults (as this is the age level of literacy required — pity it is not marketed as such), but it doesn't alter the fact his work has flaws. I've recently reviewed a collection and an anthology of ghost stories for children. The collection is excellent and knocks the spots off Asimov as far as ideas and character development go, which makes it seem strange that this is marketed for children and Asimov for adults (though Asimov does have a large adult readership and some of his books *are* beyond the understanding of children, or are too long for that age range).

I'm using a value system based on *quality*, not popularity. It is as true as it ever was that Asimov is immensely popular, but even in children's fiction you can find more sophisticated literature than Asimov has written. A critic attempts to inform the readership of the *standards* of any given book, and to do that s/he must have a consistent value system. The reader decides what standard he or she is prepared to meet when buying a book, and that is where reviews come in handy: they give a rough idea of the level of the standards of any given book. Go out and buy Asimov, by all means, but if you want more challenging reading, try an Aldiss or a LeGuin. If you don't want to be stimulated, if you want to relax, the reverse is true: buy an Asimov or a Piers Anthony or a Simak. You *can* read more challenging fiction than Asimov; you can read more sedate fiction than Iain Banks. This is what a review tells you: it makes you aware of the choice.

TERRY BROOME
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«I've been reading a lot of children's fiction in the last year; I was amazed at first at the consistently high standard and the level of sophistication you mention — of writing, characterisation, plot, ideas, moods, moral choices, etc. — way, way above Asimov et co. I'm still planning a "children's book" issue of Vector*; I have some articles commissioned or already in, but there's room for one or two more if anyone else wishes to contribute to it; but please write to me asap.*

The function of reviews and criticism: this is a subject which I think it's always worth looking at. Colin Greenland wrote on it in V129; but further articles (and of course letters) are always welcome. Here's a couple more:»

I WAS INTERESTED BY YOUR EDITORIAL IN *V134* ABOUT INTELLectual snobbery in SF, and the following letter from Jim Goddard urging reviewers to nail "bad" books to the wall. Much of the snobbery in SF is caused by reviewers believing that their personal opinions are absolute, and that anyone who disagrees is mentally sub-normal and not even worth ignoring.

Labelling a book as "good" or "bad" has no meaning unless you know who reviewed it and what kind of books they like and dislike in general. The question uppermost in my mind as I read a review is, "Am I going to invest my time and money in buying this?" To that end therefore, I feel that I should be able to tell from a review if *I* will like the book, regardless of whether the reviewer liked or disliked it.

How then do you achieve objectivity in reviewing? The answers are (a) you can't, and (b) you don't have to. The only thing you *do* have to do is let the readers know what premise it is being reviewed on, to make clear the yardstick by which the book is being measured. After all, there is rarely any point panning a book for what it doesn't even try to be.

So to the crunch: how about, as a footnote to each review in future, the reviewer giving an example of one or two books which are similar to the one under scrutiny. Effectively, this would say to the reader, "If you liked book X, you will like this book too." In some cases, particularly for established authors, this would be superfluous or insulting, but for new authors it would help readers get around any potential snobbery. If a new author has all the qualities of Asimov, Herbert or Heinlein, it's *Vector*'s job not to just crucify the book, but to say, "Look: if you like these authors you will like this book. If you don't, you won't."

BEN STAVELEY-TAYLOR
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«I think a well-written review should give enough of the "flavour" of a book that its readers can gain an impression of whether or not it's the type of book they might like, without it necessarily giving direct comparisons.»

IN REPLY TO CHRISTOPHER PRIEST'S LETTER (*V135*) I WOULD first of all like to point out that nowhere in my letter (*V134*) did I imply that Mr Priest is "nasty", nor did I interpret LJ Hurst's article ("We are the Dead", *V133*) as doing so. I cannot imagine where Mr Priest got the idea that I was criticising him, personally, for "getting at John Wyndham". I have never met Mr Priest and have read very little of his writing — only, in fact, his article in *V127*, much of which I agreed with.

The purpose of my letter was not, in any way, to denigrate Mr Priest. It was, simply, intended to agree with and praise LJ Hurst's article, whilst pointing out that, in my opinion, the article could have been made even more effective than it was by using examples from some of Wyndham's other works, along with *The Day of the Triffids*. In the single sentence of my letter to which Mr Priest referred, I was also "busy making a point" which I felt that LJ Hurst had not made clear enough, and my use of the word "bourgeoisie" (which Mr Priest referred to as myself quoting

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LJ Hurst quoting him) was essential to that particular point. I still think that the point is valid, by the way. I feel that Mr Priest is incorrect in making such a sweeping statement about John Wyndham's work. It came across as not only mistaken, but also as rather simplistic, and I cannot see how it could be favourable to John Wyndham, even in the context of an article which was favourable overall.

All of this having been said, I would at this point have liked to agree with Christopher Priest about something. Unfortunately, however, he raised another point in his letter that I have to disagree with. He described the work of Anne McCaffrey, Piers Anthony and Alan Dean Foster as "meretricious garbage".

I cannot comment on the work of Mr Anthony or Mr Foster -- I have not read anything by them apart from a couple of film novelisations by Mr Foster, which were competent and readable -- but I have read all of Anne McCaffrey's *Dragon* novels, all of which are good, entertaining, escapist fiction, and I enjoyed every one of them, unashamedly. They certainly could not be described as intellectually stimulating, and I don't blame Christopher Priest for disliking that type of novel, but I find the attitude, that disliking something automatically makes it "meretricious garbage", rather unpleasant. As far as I am concerned, entertainment value can be just as important as intellectual stimulation, and I am sure that the majority of SF fans would agree.

Now, with all that off my chest, I think that I can safely end this letter with a point upon which I agree with Mr Priest.

I have just finished reading *The Ragged Astronauts* which I was prompted to buy by the Bob Shaw article in *V134*. I can honestly say that, with the possible exception of Sturgeon's *More than Human*, it is the best and most enjoyable novel that I have read since finishing Brian Aldiss's *Helliconia* trilogy in November 1985. *The Ragged Astronauts* certainly gets my vote for the BSFA Award, and with it, Bob Shaw is not only as good as John Wyndham, he has surpassed anything that Wyndham ever wrote, and I look forward with great anticipation to reading the other books in the trilogy.

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«Sometimes you look up a word that you've used for years, and get the shock of your life. "Meretricious", according to my Shorter Oxford, *means "Of, pertaining to, befitting, or of the character of a harlot." What?? The later meaning perhaps makes more sense in the context: "Alluring by false show; showily attractive." The* Concise Oxford *relates the second meaning to an ornament or to literary style. To a large extent I agree with Chris; but you've pinpointed what it is, Robert: authors like McCaffrey, Foster, Anthony (and many others) may well provide the reader with entertainment, and there's nowt wrong with that, as you rightly say -- but they're all glitter and no substance; like a Christmas tree bauble, they're very pretty, but empty. Incidentally, for once I left all the "Mr"s in your letter to see what it looked like; but I think most authors are used to being referred to by just their surnames -- it's standard practice, anyway.*

Now a few responses to the V135 editorial -- and thank you, everybody, for not pointing out that the first word was mis-spelt. Censorship with an S indeed; whatever nekst?»

THE EDITORIAL ON CENSORSHIP IN *V135* WAS INTERESTING and stimulating.

The first thing is to analyse the forms of censorship which exist. As I see it there are at least five levels on which this can occur:

1. Writer
2. Publisher/Editor
3. Retailer
4. Purchaser
5. External sources e.g. government.

At the first level, a writer can censor his own work to make it better for publishing. I have recently done this with a piece of my own (unpublished yet) and hopefully it actually improves the story. I could have gone further; this would have rendered the punchline meaningless. If a writer is prepared to alter his work on publication grounds, good luck to him, but if it's really necessary then I think either (s)he's failed or the likes of *Dangerous Visions* and *New Worlds* have been forgotten. I hope not.

The censorship by a publisher or editor should also be minimal since *DV* and *NW*, but perhaps we *are* creeping back to those pre-60s dark ages. We must, however, separate editorial suggestions which improve a work from editorial censorship which, (usually) despoils it.

Censorship by the retailer is frequently seen. I believe at one time WH Smiths (?) refused to stock *New Worlds* though they do sell those magazines on the top shelf with undressed women in.

Censorship by the purchaser is very difficult to gauge because it is a two-edged sword. For every buyer who rejects a book on grounds of 'obscenity' etc there must be at least one who will buy out of curiosity or perversity. The pop world saw this when Radio One banned Frankie Goes To Hollywood's "Relax": it sold in thousands and was No. 1 for several weeks.

By far the most ominous and sinister level of censorship comes from external sources, particularly governments. At this stage there are three varieties: outright banning as in the current Peter Wright fiasco; heavy hints, e.g. Tebbit to the BBC; and more subtle, discrete suggestions that we may never know about. The effect of government action can be more widespread than other forms of censorship as even hints are sufficient in some cases to cause censoring by publishers etc.

I personally dislike censorship because it is so difficult to control and to keep it in proportion to the work in question. Beyond this I am much more concerned with the quality of the writing and its ability to conjure an image than the morality of that image. In higher forms of literature the censorable content is often part of a broader meaning or message which does have its own internal morality.

On to the M John Harrison interview, which was a reasonable piece to someone who's read scarcely any of his work, but one point did strike me: he says that SF and Fantasy elements were metaphors in his work. "Metaphors for stuff that a mainstream novelist would deal with directly, because he's allowed to, whereas I was never allowed to in the sense of having to write for a *genre* audience."

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This sounds like rubbish to me -- he didn't *have* to write for any audience in specifics. Either he wrote in those terms because it was all he had available at that time and hadn't developed the ability to leave them out, or he did it because he chose to.

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GOOD *VECTOR*. PHIL NICHOLS' ARTICLE A LITTLE DRY, BUT A good survey of a neglected area. Have just bought a copy of the *Barribles* book for my library, so will read it as soon as I can. (I don't *quite* agree that not being published in hardback will result in resticted circulation of a book, but that needs more space to amplify the argument than I've got here!)

ANDY SAWYER
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I WOULD FIRST LIKE TO ADDRESS MALCOLM EDWARDS'S COMMENTS on my article about SF editors: knowing their names or meeting them at conventions isn't what I was talking about as I'm sure Malcolm knows. I'm addressing the same topic as your editorial in *V135*, implicit censorship (implicit in that any selection procedure means non-selection of some items which is fertile ground for censorship).

There are few writers who can guarantee their books will be published no matter what -- Heinlein, Asimov and Clarke, perhaps. There is then a further, and larger, group who can probably be assured of publication if their stories are competent and the content not too far away from what the publisher deems suitable. As for everyone else, well, they have an editor who has his/her views of what constitutes "good" SF to satisfy. So what is published and what we read is in many, if not most cases due to the editor as much as the writer. Is that heresy? Perhaps a series of interviews/articles about the editors at the major SF publishers would be worthwhile.

«I've asked two editors -- no names, no packdrill -- over the last year if they would like to write an article defending themselves against such criticisms, which have occurred many times over the years in Vector. *The response has been a deafening silence. How about it, Malcolm? -- or any other publisher's SF editor? An opportunity to put your side of the argument.»*

I very much enjoyed Phil Nichols's article on the TVSF of Harlan Ellison; it makes some very interesting and entertaining points. Having seen *A Boy and his Dog* on TV recently I was surprised Ellison allowed the beginning of the escape from the underground "city" to be changed, as those who would have found the story unacceptable would have found the film just as unacceptable.

How interesting that Maureen Porter's review of Geoff Ryman's *The Unconquered Country* tells me the book restores "a lot of the fine detail" sacrificed for the magazine version but in *PI63* Edward James tells me he couldn't find any differences. I suppose truth is relative.

My views on *Vector* and *PI* running reviews of the same book have changed over this past year. I have written opposing the practice but I now see some merit in it as it provides more than one view in this subjective arena. (I don't even mind them appearing in the same mailing.) A case in point is Mike Moir's review of Kim Stanley Robinson's *The Wild Shore* which was much more balanced than the *PI* review of some years ago where, as Mike says, it was reviewed for its ideological stance not as a novel. *PI* also criticised the science, mainly the lack of a severe nuclear winter. First I should point out that whilst the facts, theories and models favour a nuclear winter the severity of it is in much doubt, the model does make a lot of assumptions, as one would anticipate, and our ability to model the atmosphere is very restricted even with several Crays grinding away. Second, since when does accurate science really matter a damn in an SF story. Well, it's taken a couple of years but I've finally got that out of my system.

TOM JONES
14 Haywood
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Berks RG12 4WG

«It's not often any of us admits in print to changing one's mind on something, Tom! Glad you liked Phil Nichols's article. Between the writing and the publication was quite a gap, and Phil has sent me a few further details:»

SINCE I COMPLETED THE ARTICLE, THERE HAVE BEEN ONE OR TWO little developments. The feature film of *A Boy and his Dog* was given its TV première here (BBC2, 22-11-86); some of the Ellison-based *Twilight Zones* have been released on video by CBS/Fox ("Paladin of the Lost Hour" and "Shatterday"); and David J Schow and Jeffrey Frentzen have produced a book, *The Outer Limits: the Official Companion* (Ace, 1986) which gives further detail on Ellison's work for that series.

Much though I enjoy the works of M John Harrison, I was a little irritated to find interviews with M John in the latest issues of both *Interzone* and *Vector* -- and both conducted by Paul Kincaid. I know the overlap between the two interviews is minimal, but I still felt a little cheated.

PHIL NICHOLS
19 Kendal Avenue
Copnor
Portsmouth
Hants PO3 5AX

«As you know to your cost, Phil, you can never guarantee when something will see print; the coincidence of publication was completely coincidental. I should stress that there is no connection between Vector *(or the BSFA in general) and IZ, though obviously they share some readers, and, sometimes, writers. Ditto* Foundation. *The UK SF world ain't all that big, after all.*

Finally, an unusual query from Germany:»

I AM RECENTLY ON HOLIDAY IN ENGLAND, WALKING IN THE Dales of Yorkshire. On one of the days I was lucky to see a very strange type of tree. It is one I have not been familiar with ever before, yet I can say I am an interested observer of all types of plants and know a great deal about trees.

This tree was a very large but crooked variety with many long thorns and black bark. I understand a hawthorn and blackthorn, but this was not one of those. My wife and I were talking about it when a man from the village passed us and we asked him if he knew the name from the tree. He said it was called a *ragthorn*.

Now, sir, I have read the scientific romances from Jules Verne and HG Wells and I am sure that in one of their stories there was a reference to this tree, the ragthorn. Could you assist me please? Perhaps if you print this letter in your magazine, some one of your readers might recall which of the stories I mean, since I cannot now find the reference.

I am sending this to you in the hope that you will help me. Your address was given to me by an editor friend from Heine publishings. Why I am so interested is because the man who told us the name of the tree made the sign of the cross on his chest. I think it is HG Wells that a man does the same.

DR MED UWE MAGEuS
5138 Heinsberg
Karken
Deutschland (Westen)

«If anyone knows the answer, please let Uwe know -- and let Vector *know as well; I'm intrigued.»*

ALBION WRIT

Garry Kilworth

There are two things which disturb me; a belief that:
1. There are rules which govern the writing of a short story, and that:
2. The only important aspect of a short story is its idea content.

SHORT STORIES

ARE PEOPLE TOO

Garry Kilworth is, without any doubt in my mind, the British Master of the short story form. In this article he raises a number of controversial points about the writing of short stories. In addition to letters, I would welcome articles from other professional authors, replying to Garry, and putting forward their own points of view. -- DVB

Outside Science Fiction and Fantasy, the short story is barely breathing. You see even fewer short story collections and anthologies than you do volumes of poetry, and we all know how well poetry sells. In the past few decades the best short stories have come out of South America, from the pens of magical realists like Borges and Cortázar, though very recently I read an impressive collection by a new young British writer, Ronald Frame, whose "Watching Mrs Gordon" has a subtle power and intensity I have not met lately in any English writer. Somewhere towards the end of the story the reader is given a tremendous blow, just over the heart, but the realisation of being struck does not come until later. Nothing is stated. One cannot even point to a certain place in the story and say, "This is where I *knew*." The subtlety transcends any specific sentence or paragraph. The revelation is hidden in the tight weave of the whole tapestry, and when one looks for it afterwards, it is very difficult to find even the general area of the delivery.

However, to return to my opening statement, the short story is barely alive. In Britain you can count the number of magazines that accept short stories on a single hand, with the thumb and forefinger missing. America is not that much better, outside the SF field. I recently sent two short mainstream stories to my agent over there and she wrote back: "The commercial outlets (for mainstream short stories) died with the *Saturday Evening Post, Colliers*, etc., more than 30 years ago." The SF magazines, whether they wish to or not, therefore carry a heavy responsibility for the short story.

There are two things which disturb me a little, gleaned from attending writers' workshops and reading the various magazines which circulate the SF scene. One is a belief that there are rules which govern the writing of a short story, and two, that the only important aspect of a short story is its idea content. I would like to deal with the latter misconception first.

Because of the nature of our genre it is expected that the something "new" we require of all books and authors should be an idea, a concept, rather than a style, form, unusual characterisation, or virtually any other literary device. Originality of theme comes first. It is possible, though I cannot quote an instance, that an SF author might have broken entirely new ground in novel *form*, but if his or her plot contains nothing new to SF readers by way of thematic *content*, then forget it. It seems that we cannot look into the depths if our vision is hampered by robots, closed environments, alien occupation (yawn) and all the other ideas that have been done to death by our literature. Why? I wish I knew. We are still, after all these years, more impressed by the gloss than by the quality of the carving. It is little wonder that we collect sniffs from the readers of serious general fiction, when we enthuse over the obvious.

I am, to a certain extent however, willing to accept this attitude with regard to the SF novel, but the short story is a different matter. I rise swiftly to its defence. I am passionate about its rôle, its *raison d'être*, its essence, its *necessity*. I would start a bar-room brawl over the short story. I might even kill for it, if it were threatened with extinction and the only way to save it were to wipe out its opposition. (I would certainly go over the top on its behalf!) The short story might indeed be *about* something. I would present no arguments against a linear plot, which tells of an incident or accident, and is carefully encapsulated, containing all the information necessary to understand exactly what happened, how and why. In fact, a short SF novel. People read them and enjoy them and this is reason enough for their existence. Just as many early SF stories were extended jokes, which without the final line would have been totally disappointing. Again, no serious personal objections arise in my breast. I have written both. My objections begin with the idea that these are the only acceptable forms of presentation. It is not only *about* something -- it also *does*. A good short story is a manipulator of emotions. It stirs them to a turmoil. It creates chaos with feelings.

I believe that one of the reasons short story collections, by writers particularly brilliant at that form, have lost their popularity, is because the intensity of feeling derived from reading a single short story -- say in a Borges collection -- leaves the reader drained, and it is difficult, sometimes impossible, to read a second or third immediately afterwards. One of the reasons for the success of the fat, readable novel is that it fills a space of time.

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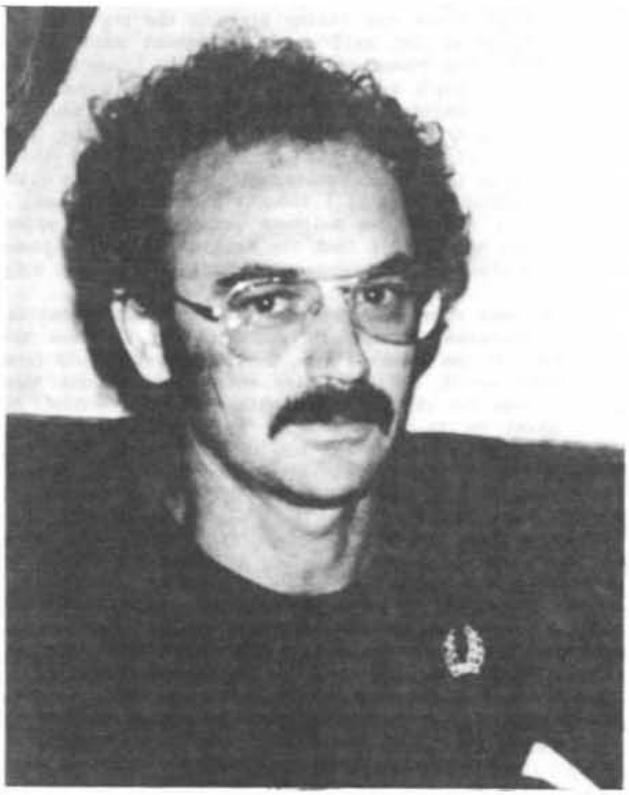

We live at a fast pace and if we put a book down it must be easy to pick up again, because we have other things to do, all more important than reading. We need books to fill the unimportant hours, to relax with, and if we read a story which takes the breath away and drains the emotions, what do we do with the rest of the train journey? Sit and sweat?

A short story is the essence of a much larger, looser work -- a concentrated collection of words which, to quote Julio Cortázar, "works from the interior to the exterior, not from outside in as if you were modelling the sphere out of clay." It should burn with a brief but brilliant flame, so that it hurts to look at it. It does not necessarily have to be about dinosaurs, or starships, or near futures, though it may contain these things; it needs to reach inside and twist the guts, so that you pay attention to it. I am not mixing my metaphors here, because I believe a good short story can do all these things: it is a live creature, with a strong odour, intense, bright eyes and wicked claws. This creature can only be brought to life with skill, by manipulating form, not simply by the idea content. The latter has to be presented in such a way as to induce these effects: not served up boiled or fried.

What I am about to say next, concerning *Trillion Year Spree*, might give rise to the accusation that I have a personal grievance. This would be true. I think one or two of the 40 short stories I have published in the last ten years warranted as much attention as my American contemporaries, especially the spiral plot. I would be lying if I said that the glancing half-sentence given to *The Songbirds of Pain* satisfied me personally. However, the book was not written to bolster egos like mine and is an excellent work: much was demanded of it from all the various corners of the SF field. It could not be expected to fulfil all those demands, and like any encyclopedic tome, it must leave holes or become a hundred thousand-page volumes. It is an easy target for critics. My particular quibble is that it gives the short story minimal attention and those that do receive attention do so on the strength of the idea behind them, not for the skilful use of form.

Trillion Year Spree stated that there was "little sign of (SF) growing into the natural form of expression for young writers". Nor will it ever while we concentrate only on structures consistent with SF conservatism and look to the idea content as being the only important cargo carried by the vehicle. To ignore expressionism as a legitimate form is to deny the young writer a means of transcending the genre. Happily, stories like Ryman's "The Unconquered Country" do not know they are out of line and go ahead and win awards anyway. One of the reasons I like *Interzone* is that they publish stories which long-established magazines scorn as being too whatever (you can supply your own adjective here, since they cover a wide range). Readers may dislike *IZ* for a lot of reasons, but the magazine does publish stories, which non-existent magazines do not. That sound trite? Well, think about it.

The power of the short story lies in its ability to surprise the reader and jolt him or her out of complacency. Obvious content has no monopoly technique for bringing this about. On the surface, Poe's "Ligeia" can be read as a ghost story, except it is more likely a murder story, and the only way the reader learns this is by discovering, through the subtlety of the writing, that the narrator is not to be trusted. He is totally unreliable as a source of truth.

Similarly, the narrator of "The Fall of the House of Usher" gives us clues to his doubtful sanity. Take for instance the following passage:

> A small picture (painted by Usher) presented the interior of an immensely long and rectangular vault or tunnel, with low walls, smooth, white, and without interruption or device. Certain accessory points of the design served well to convey the idea that this excavation lay at an exceeding depth below the surface of the earth. No outlet was observed in any portion of its vast extent, and no torch, or other artificial source of light was discernible; yet a flood of intense rays rolled throughout and bathed the whole in a ghastly and inappropriate splendour.

Anything smooth, white, without projections and bathed in light has no shadow. That without shadow has no form. Therefore the narrator is describing a blank white canvas. Once we know this, we have to question the narrator's motives or sanity, and suspect any other statements from him. There are several others in the story, one to do with music from Usher's hand, which when the description is boiled down reveals that he is merely plucking out a single note, time and time again.

The surface *idea* behind the story concerns the supernatural destruction of the last surviving members of an aristocratic family. Both these stories, "Ligeia" and "The Fall of the House of Usher", would fit quite well into a book of spooky tales -- in fact they did, because I read them in comic form as a kid -- except they are much more than that. Poe hid his hard, practical reasons behind a supernatural front. One has to look beyond the trappings of the genre for the *real* story, and I feel this is often ignored in the SF field because we are so concerned with looking for glitzy new pseudo-scientific ideas. We may not have our Poes and Hawthornes, but who the hell can tell when we allow ourselves to be blinded by the sheen?

> Where do ideas for stories come from? The development of ideas is a *learned* process, with nothing magical behind it.

Now, the first point raised at the beginning of this article: that there are rules governing the writing of a short story.

At a well-known writers' workshop recently, it was argued by some members that a story should never be in the present tense. "The present tense is untenable." Nonsense. It is difficult to make a story work in the present tense, but God's secretary only brought one set of stone tablets down from the mount and the short story was not mentioned on either of them. The present tense is just as legitimate a tool as any other, provided the craftsman uses it properly. (In fact even "properly" is a value judgement. If

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it is deemed *appropriate* by the author.) Imagine going into a cabinet makers and saying to the carpenter, "You can't use a spokeshave any more -- it's not a tenable tool."

Perhaps at this point I should say what I think a short story should do. Well, it probably does not need saying, since it is so obvious, but a short story should evoke some sort of response in the reader. In this respect I do not regard the short story as being a medium of communication between the writer and reader. The communication is between the story and the reader. I say this because the aspect of the tale that evokes the response may have been unintended by the writer. The author might not even know it is there. In the words of some critic, whose name escapes me, "Just because you wrote it doesn't mean you know what it's about."

I believe it's entirely wrong to put walls around creativity, especially in a genre like ours, where the imagination must have no boundaries, either in content or form. Restrictions bind individual expression. If the story does not work, for *any* reader, then it will find its own hole in which to bury itself. It is as well to remember too, that time changes tastes:

> "Fitzgerald found no-one would publish his translation of Omar Khayyam. Eventually it was printed anonymously and most of the copies ended up in the penny remainder box." (Fred Richards)

The original author had fared no better in his time, amongst his own people. There is a Shiah Sect prayer, which reads:

> "O God, curse Omar. Then Abis Behr and Omar. Then Ottoman and Omar. Then Omar. Then Omar again."

Somewhat savage criticism, when you find the whole force of religion ranged against your little poem.

When I write a short story, it is in a state of white heat. It obsesses me entirely and usually I cannot stop until the first draft is on paper. The story actually already exists, in my head, but I have to get it out onto hard copy to make room for something else -- like, what am I going to have for breakfast. Since my early twenties I must have written at least 300 stories, only 40 of which have found print. Most of the unpublished ones have been seen by my eyes only. This does not bother me, since I learn from my failures and they have to be exorcised anyway. My writing career began with a short story ("Let's go to Golgotha") and I have Brian Aldiss to thank for recognising any worth it might have. If I am writing anything at all as I draw my last breath, I hope it will be a short story. Its form is part of me. I have a relationship with the poem and the novel, but the short story has made its home in the organ that pumps the blood around my body. It incenses me to see it treated as secondary to the novel. Dwarfs are people too. Sometimes they are big people, like Napoleon. Ask King David whether size is the measure. Small is big.

The short story goes back at least to 1400 BC -- the Ancient Egypt of Rameses II -- with "The Two Brothers", its manuscript being one of the oldest in the world. It has a long, illustrious history, albeit it has taken a back seat at times to other forms of literature. I think it was Julio Cortázar who said, "The short story is not always fashionable, but it is always *there*." It is going through one of its lean periods at present, but go through it will, and live on, if we do not allow it to stagnate and are not completely intolerant towards experiments.

CODA

Having said in the above that the idea content in a short story is not its *raison d'être*, it is still, none the less, a very important element, and during the writing of the article I began thinking about the eternal question, "Where do you get your ideas from?" If there is a *cliché-de-la-cliché* (forgive me Miss Jean Brodie) it is this enquiry. Believe me, it is still asked, with the same amount of enthusiasm which accompanied it two and a half thousand years ago, when Homer was riding high on the royalties of *The Iliad* (I think his half-yearly statement said eighty black ships). The reason it's still asked, I suppose, is that it's a reasonable question and one that has never been answered to the satisfaction of those that wish to know.

When I first started to think about it, having been asked a couple of times, I got scared. I felt that there was something a little too subliminal there to meddle with. I became frightened that if I thought about it too much, I might actually damage the delicate process through which ideas came to me. I felt that the imagination was a place that once violated might cease to function. It was holy ground.

I had seen other writers shy away from the question, as if it contained a nest of spiders, and realised the reason why. If the subconscious, having been fed data from the ordinary world, did something extraordinary with this input and then fed the conscious with a bizarre, unusual or oblique slant on those data, then that process might be interfered with by discovering how it came about. When Bob Dylan was looking for something, he was interesting. Once he had found it, he ceased to be interesting because it turned out to be nothing new. There was no mystery.

Most authors don't know where their ideas come from and they're afraid that if they do discover the source, it will consume them with worry. It's a kind of magical well. The buckets go down into the darkness and come up full, and they don't want to know where the water comes from, or they would find all their time concerned with met forecasts, water tables, permeable rock, evaporation, rainclouds, droughts and a hundred other factors. Once those kind of thoughts get a hold of the mind, they squeeze the other channels and stop the flow.

So, like many others, I didn't want to know, and murmured responses like, "In the bath", hoping to brush off the questioner and leave me free to wipe the taboo thoughts from my brain. But then one day I was reading LeGuin's *The Wind's Twelve Quarters* and in the preamble to "The Ones who Walk Away from Omelas" she says, "...where do I get my ideas from? Why, from forgetting Dostoyevsky and reading roadsigns backwards." (The town in the title is Salem, backwards, with an O added.) That's not important. What is important is that LeGuin used a spin-off from Dostoyevsky's *Brothers Karamazov* -- the scapegoat -- as the story's central theme. The fact that she had cloned an idea and did not realise it until later suggests that it was subconscious use. It then occurred to me that perhaps ideas did not just float in through the window: perhaps development of ideas was a *learned* process, with nothing more magical behind it than constant use of the right area of the mind.

There are many writers who would not like this theory. After all, *inspiration* is what separates them from the common run, and inspiration is a divine mystery, a gift from the gods, a talent -- not a learned skill, which smacks of hard work and practise, like carpentry. The Romantics, for example, were fervently in favour of it. A poet was a special kind of person in Coleridge's eyes and there were extra levels in the poet's mind which helped to filter and reassemble the ordinary into the remarkable. Wordsworth believed in a kind of memory perfection, that pared away any dross. Poets were people of vision. Emerson, not so romantic, but just as special, thought that poems -- ideas -- were songs created by the earth and that special people were able to hear these songs and commit them to paper. However, it *may* be that all these poets produced such brilliant works because they applied themselves to a particular train of thought. Certainly a great many writers seem to work up to a peak of ideas.

So, for what it's worth I offer the suggestion that the development of ideas is a learned process: a skill which is refined by constant practise and hard work. I have little proof regarding this theory, but a lot of faith. I like the thought that good ideas arise from pools of sweat. It does not worry me so much as the thought that some delicate mechanism might one day break down.

THE MAVERICK ASTRONOMER

Gregory Benford

1987 will mark the 30th anniversary of the first publication of Fred Hoyle's The Black Cloud. *Greg Benford wrote this piece as the introduction to a leather-bound special edition of the book, published by The Easton Press in its* Masterpieces of Science Fiction *series.*

WHEN ONE OF THE MOST PROMINENT SCIENTISTS IN THE world turned to writing strict genre science fiction, the realms of both literature and science took notice. It is difficult now to recapture the startled remarks of both reviewers and scientists when Fred Hoyle published *The Black Cloud* in 1957, apparently not noticing that he had linked science fiction and real, hard science in a way no one had before.

Many consider *The Black Cloud* to be Hoyle's best fiction, and indeed as his most enduring work. As *The (London) Times Literary Supplement* remarked, "What gives probability to the story is the author's command of a wide range of scientific reference... The reader follows diagrams and stumbles through equations and begins to feel quite a scientist himself by the end of the story."

Exactly. Hoyle later told me that his method of writing fiction was to begin by thinking the whole story over carefully, perhaps making some notes and doing calculations. Then he would clear a week or so from his busy personal schedule, sit down and begin writing as quickly as he could, holding the whole tale in his head. When he wrote conversations -- for his books often have great slabs of talk, highbrow intellectual pingpong among scientists -- he would try to reproduce how he carried on collaborative discussions with the leading astronomers of his day.

All this was qualitatively different from the science fiction that came before. Certainly scientists had been major characters, and, indeed, ornate technical talk festooned even the early pulp magazines. But never before had science fiction conveyed convincingly the lively logic of scientists at work. Writers had pressed their noses against the glass, peering inward at the technicolour glow of science, but none had participated at the highest levels. The *Daily Telegraph* rightly remarked that *The Black Cloud* would tell readers "....more about the scientific mind than a dozen treatises."

Hoyle had followed CP Snow's earlier forays into the world of science and power. Both used minimal dramatic skills, leaning heavily on occasionally cumbersome authorial voice. (Chapter Three opens, "It is necessary now to describe the consternation that Kingsley's cablegram produced in Pasadena.") Both gave us yards of talk, deliberately avoiding any taint of melodrama. But Hoyle's crucial change was to introduce, without apology, a speculative premise. He had seen that an incisive way to show scientists at work lay in making them solve a problem that was new and important. This was clearly more interesting than recounting the history of discoveries in crystallography, as Snow had done in *The Search*.

What's more, Hoyle believed there was merit to his speculations. His preface flatly says, "After all, there is very little here that could not conceivably happen." To underline this, Hoyle did not set his story a comfortable few decades ahead. He placed it smack in his own time, waving away the fact that this would date the story superficially within a few years. This minor loss was offset by the verisimilitude of using England as it was in 1956, warts and all. We don't mind that computers use "valves" (electronic tubes, replaced by transistors in the late 1950s) and are programmed by holes punched in paper tape. What matters is the excitement of watching people struggle with large problems.

Not that these are fully rounded people. Hoyle devoted little space to "humanising" his characters, perhaps because he has always felt that there are types of people whose thinking is more important than any other facet. Like many untutored authors, he ends up portraying himself. He seems to have realised this, and in his Preface warily sidesteps identification of his characters with real people. But the central figure of *The Black Cloud* is clearly much like Hoyle.

Even before I met Hoyle in 1963, I had wondered if this novel's Chris Kingsley was a stand-in for the author. The novel had affected me strongly, because for the first time it united my growing interest in science with the zest of speculation I enjoyed in science fiction. When I arrived at the University of California in La Jolla, to register for graduate study in physics, I was startled to see a notice announcing a seminar by Hoyle that very week. I arrived early, and saw a man of middling height who spoke with straightforward assertion, his manner and accent quite different from the studied styles of Oxford and Cambridge. His seminar was a brilliant argument in favour of a new cosmology, and he quickly covered the green writing boards with tensor equations. He was at his best in the give-and-take of questions afterward, when he attacked the conventional wisdom of the big-bang cosmology. That was the clue. Physically Hoyle didn't resemble Kingsley, but there was that air: "I'm only really comfortable as an underdog," Kingsley remarks in the novel, and indeed Hoyle has played that rôle throughout his career.

His first major break with convention came with the Steady-State theory, which imposes in one bold stroke the requirement that the universe look the same at all times. (This paralleled the condition already invoked in existing theories, that the universe look the same in all directions, from any point. That immediately means the universe must appear to be expanding no matter where you are. This imposes certain strong conditions on theory.) Demanding that the universe not change with time means that matter must be created at a steady rate, to force the expansion. The Steady-State theory was a lovely idea, but the story of science is that of the brutal murder of beautiful theories by ugly facts. The nasty fact that the universe had an earlier, hotter phase (producing the microwave hiss known as three-degree, cosmic background radiation) finally killed the Steady-State model.

While he made major contributions to many fields, from stellar evolution to cosmology, Hoyle became best known for

Continued ... Page 22

Michael Cobley

THE GHOST IN THE PEN

PART 1 -- Science Fiction

WALTER LIPPMAN SAID:
While no-one can seriously maintain that the greatest number must have the greatest wisdom, or the greatest virtue, there is no denying that, under modern social conditions, they are unlikely to have the most power.
It makes sense, but turn it on its head and it makes sense too: it is because the majority is proclaimed to be wise, virtuous and true by the democratic system that their elected representatives have the most power. The concept of the "absolute rightness" of the democratic society is the Divine Right of Kings reborn.

And what does this have to do with politics and philosophy as observed in the glitterglass of SF and fantasy? Quite a lot...

For stealthily, almost unnoticed in the last 70 years or so, one particular aspect of the speculative field has emerged and grown towards a maturity. It is the parallel between the "whatiffery" of SF and the pre-Socratic philosophers of Ancient Greece. Without plunging nose-first into a welter of history, the pre-Socratics were philosophers who kept a belief in their myths; if they saw a thunderstorm comingthey would say "Uh-oh, looks like Zeus is angry, chaps!" But their belief was tempered with the innovation of *discussing* their myths, changing them if they didn't seem to fit the facts, and proposing new ones in their stead.

In the same way, SF was discussing canals on Mars, jungles on Venus and rocket flight decades before Sputnik, Gemini and the planetary probes either totally demolished those pet fictional ideas or put them under pressure to change. Thus the light of experience and demonstrable fact demands that old theories be rigorously examined in the presence of new evidence. This can be elegantly shown by the way Einstein's theories contain and account for Newton's, just as Newton's did the same for the Copernican and Galilean.

Digging my way back out of this sidetrack I want to emphasise the exploratory and explanatory ways of some SF and fantasy writers. With regard to politics and philosophy, their ability to explore and explain -- and their literary skill -- has changed considerably over these past decades. For some, growing towards a maturity. But for others it has been quite different.

The progressive stages in the development of science fiction (fantasy will be discussed in a later article) have been discerned by no less an authority than Dr Asimov. He suggested four periods:

1926-1938 Adventure dominant
1938-1950 Science dominant
1950-1965 Sociology dominant
1965 ⇒ Style dominant.

As a kind of nod to the pre-Socratics I should like to rename these four and add a fifth, so that the list would read:

Sense of Wonder
Scientific and Social Naivety
Dread
Confusion (to 1980)
Schisms (since 1980).

This alternative nomenclature might be illustrated by the following:
Sense of Wonder: EE Doc Smith, Edgar Rice Burroughs, "Tom Swift";
Scientific & Social Naivety: Isaac Asimov, Robert Heinlein, Arthur C. Clarke, Jack Williamson, Ed Hamilton;
Dread: George Orwell, Ted Sturgeon, Philip K. Dick, Brian Aldiss, Harlan Ellison;
Confusion: Michael Moorcock, Norman Spinrad, Harlan Ellison, John Brunner, Roger Zelazny;
Schisms: William Gibson, Bruce Sterling, Piers Anthony, Jack Chalker, "Perry Rhodan", Star Wars, fantasy, rôle-playing games, Conan pastiches, trilogies.

But rather than rely solely on these examples, I would like to link the five periods to society in the real world

a view of politics and philosophy in science fiction and fantasy

as it changed. Writers, after all, live a dual existence, in both the inner worlds of their creations and the outer world that rolls by, tugging on every human life, including their own. And it could be said that it is the writer's expectations of the outer world that colour the explanations of his inner worlds.

Pre-World War II, there was a pervasive belief that, despite the Depression, science and technology could produce wondrous devices whose functions were only limited by the imaginations of inventors in their self-financed labs (and, presumably, the extent of their personal finance!). The age possessed a boisterous and assured view of the capabilities of science, and a set of unshakeably confident heroes: Flash Gordon and Buck Rogers, Doc Savage and the Shadow, John Carter of Mars, Kimball Kinnison and the ageless Tom Swift. Mostly, the kind of problems those paladins had to face involved situations in which the good guys were undeniably good and the bad guys unequivocably bad. There were plain dualisms — good and bad was white and black with little or no room for ambiguity, complexity or depth of character.

The second period was really the apprenticeship era, epitomised by John Campbell whose *Astounding/Analog* stable of writers included, as well as Asimov, Heinlein and Clarke, others like L.Ron Hubbard, L. Sprague de Camp, AE Van Vogt, Harry Harrison, Alfred Bester and Murray Leinster. The science still possessed that fair sterility of consequences, but the characters were becoming human and thus the plots were being affected by them. Ambiguity was creeping in and the sharp edges of white/black were beginning to blur. In Asimov's *Foundation* stories, at first the bad guys were those who tried to oppose the workings of Seldon's great Plan. Later, the beneficiaries of the Plan themselves seem almost unworthy of its greatness, while some of the Foundation's agents are certainly less than whiter than white -- Hober Mallow for one, Lathan Devers for another. While the *Foundation* trilogy still possesses its grand sweep, its Psychohistory is a little misleading, being an unmistakeable paraphrase of Marx's economic and social theories.

The idea that incontrovertible Truth could be seen by those prepared to look without malice in their hearts still existed, but it was now less restricted by that good old Sensawunda. It was still believed that science and technology could unlock a bounty for mankind -- despite the Hitler war -- and that society could be perfected, perhaps even Man too. In the end it was two cataclysmic explosions which dealt that confidence a blow from which it never truly recovered.

The Berlin Blockade, the Cold War, McCarthy, CND marches, and the Bay of Pigs. Fear is something of a transient emotion but dread is far more pervasive and enduring, and many works from that period are tinged with a heavy greyness and describe struggles against corporate and state greed, malice and indifference. Orwell's, *1984* is the starkest example of this, depicting a society where power is derived primarily from the control of knowledge, a facility residing firmly with Big Brother or the clique behind him.

To be rigid about it, Orwell was not strictly an SF writer, but that he has been an influence in the field cannot be doubted. The post-war years provoked writers into examining and writing about subjects previously thought to be outside the true business of science fiction. In *Earth Abides* by George Stewart, the global catastrophe of a virulent plague resulting in the regression of the remains of human culture to that of hunter-gatherers was a warning written in the late 1940s. Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*, like *1984*, described power as being synonymous with a control of knowledge that demands the destruction of that subversive illegality, the book. Philip K. Dick's visions in *Time out of Joint* and *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch* are demonstrations of how the warping of perception subjects the unknowing to the whims of the knowing -- in *Time out of Mind* an entire façade of an existence is constructed by the military around a man, Ragel Gumm, so that his unique precognitive ability can be exploited without his knowledge. In *Three Stigmata* Palmer Eldritch returns from an interstellar trip with a lichen

drug which, when taken, binds the user in an austere sub-reality where Eldritch is an omnipresent near-deity.

Einsteinian physics was starting to filter through, placing the speed of light limit on space travel, while indeterminacy began to make an impact among the burgeoning youth movements, cults and fashions. 1960-1965 itself was a kind of transition barrier during which the fear changed from limited dread and protest into outright rejection and opposition, resulting in horrors like the massacre by the State National Guard of four students from Kent State University in the USA.

The fifteen years up to 1980 began with a hodge-podge of styles, movements, beliefs and campaigns that ended in the confusion of the mid-70s. With the fall of Nixon and the ousting of the Heath government an uncertainty of direction became apparent. Some factions reckoned that their battles had been won and their sufferings vindicated, some seemed to withdraw into a social and cultural shell, while others thought it safe to join the "chastised" and "purged" Establishment and reap the odd profit here and there. A few kept on fighting their particular struggles.

Harry Harrison's ***Make Room! Make Room!*** turned New York into a baked, dusty ant-hill of a city, its inhabitants living on soya and oatmeal and suffering a creeping, drawn-out imbroglio of social decay. While this novel -- one of his finest -- is not a crash-bang-wallop adventure, its detailed atmosphere and description give a chilling and credible image of runaway population.

Harlan Ellison is a writer whose voice and protest has carried convincingly from the 60s into the 80s. Yet the 70s perplexities had their effect on him too, as shown in one of his stories from 1971, "Silent in Gehenna". A young man, Joe Bob Hickey, tries to kidnap the President Comptroller of a future USA in order to obtain the freedom of his fellow rebels. But in failing he is transported to a cage in a strange world where humans are the slaves of bulbous aliens. Through the bars of his cage he shouts at the slaves, begging them to revolt. At this the aliens pause before him to wail and beat themselves with whips. Then they leave, whipping the humans who pull them around in carts. It is a very bitter story, betraying, I think, Ellison's anger at American politicians of the time, enacting public penance while practicing the same shoddy venalities as before.

Corruption, greed and stupidity are the intertwining causes underpinning the environmental horrors portrayed in *The Sheep Look Up* by John Brunner. I had not read this book until this year, and considering our recent environmental catastrophes (Chernobyl *et al* the relevance of this work cannot be overstated.

A remarkable book from this epoch is *A World Between* by Norman Spinrad, to my knowledge one of the few genuine attempts to look at the problems inherent in the open democratic society. To Pacifica, a planetary electronic democracy, come representatives of the two ideologies locked in a galactic struggle -- the Transcendental Scientists who are very much the male-dominated group, and the Femocrats who are the flip side of what might be termed a Möbius coin. The story that unfolds as each group attempts to use the planet's media democracy to seize control, is fascinating as well as very entertaining.

The Somnolent Seventies sapped whatever remained of the faith in technology that survived the dread and protests of the 50s and 60s. Science and technology still had their adherents but they were in no way the majority of pre-Dread days.

The 70s also seemed to put the dissenters to sleep. Such that by the time they began to realise that things had been going wrong, and that the Authoritarians of a decade ago had returned, seemingly stronger than before, it was too late to organise effective resistance. This is certainly true in the US where the Moral Majority-backed Authoritarians are firmly in the ascendant. In the UK, however, such anti-democratic and "resolute" politics seem to be on the wane.

With the awakening confusion of groups in the 80s has come a pervasive air of self-preservation and a host of life-styles and beliefs that scarcely ever meet at any level. Yuppies and other semi-artificial demographic splinter youth groups abound. Personal, social and corporate greed combines with illiteracy to produce a vast ocean of ignorance. Crests of stupidity and prejudice swell, undulating towards a tidal wave.

It may be a dismal picture I paint but I feel it to be an accurate one. This age of schisms and segmentation has been echoed in its culture, its art and its literature. Science fiction, naturally, is not immune to this and it is at conventions where the marketed divides become most apparent -- Rôle-Playing, Trekkies, Computing, Dr Who, Re-enactment Societies, Fanzines, Fantasy, Trilogies, Fantasy Trilogies! There is practically no discourse reaching and involving the vast majority of SF readers who are not con-goers, never mind the con-goers themselves!

The writers, though, look to be reasonably in touch with what's happening, going by some of the stories being printed in the amateur press. Many of these stories are filled with despair and hopelessness, which is hardly surprising as those are common aspects of life among the poor and unemployed of our society. Unfortunately, there is a danger that some of the new writers may be as uncritical of some of the more common ideologies (socialist, communist, anarchist) as the earlier writers were of science and technology. Yes, these philosophies may be useful in explaining the world,, but beyond a certain point they all become Truth-traps.

The search for Truth is a danger-pitted path. SF is at its noblest when its writers hypothesise and offer explanations while writing with an inventive skill that challenges our perceptions and stretches our imaginations. To reach for a non-existent absolute truth is to strait-jacket the mind; what price imagination then?

At present there are many groups and individuals offering Truth and assurance, in the UK as well as in the US. But in SF specifically there is a discernible movement among the technophiles that sees the SDI ("Star Wars") programme as A Good Thing, and which is willing to support a US Space Programme at any price. Even if the price is the axing of civilian and commercial flights, with control over the programme in the hands of the military. It is tempting to ask if this is the end function of hard SF: from prediction and investigation on the edges of science, to active promotion of government policy.

The ideologies and people who promise absolute and infallible truth are often seen by their followers as great, good and kind, staunchly resisting the depradations of doubting barbarians. Wise they seem, and dollar-palmed. This upsurge in need for the absolute Truth is reflected in the veritable explosion in fantasy stories, films and games. Thus it is the Fantasy genre that will be examined in Part II of this article, in a future issue.

BOOKS

REVIEWS EDITED BY
Paul Kincaid

THE HITCHHIKER'S GUIDE TO THE GALAXY - Douglas Adams
[Heinemann, 1986, 590pp, £9.95]
Reviewed by Jim England

HUMOUR IS A FUNNY THING. THAT IT IS quite different from wit (or rather not quite the same) and not at all easy to define is the sort of statement Adams might easily have made (but does not) in this book, in his characteristically verbose fashion. It is purely a matter of taste whether one regards: "Could you pass me that bowl of grated Arcturian Mega-Donkey?" (p.138) as funny or (p.15) the statement that 2000 years ago a man was "nailed to a tree for saying how great it would be to be nice to people for a change". I don't.

Adams is a Cambridge graduate in English and former script editor of *Doctor Who* who appears to like to see his words in print (cf Asimov) much as some people like to hear the sound of their own voices. It matters not what sense the words make, so long as their number is impressive. This book is too long. Most of it has appeared in print before, has been broadcast as a radio series, appeared on records and TV, and is soon (according to the author) to be "a major motion picture". And here it is again. It is, of course, intended to be an anarchic romp based on old SF clichés, and one finds echoes of the Marx Brothers, Lewis Carroll, Coward and the dialogues of Peter Cook and Dudley Moore. It is pseudo-sophisticated, pseudo-intellectual and tailor made for the BBC. But the humour is flip, shallow and more nihilistic than anarchic. It is impossible to identify with any of the characters because they are impossible to believe in. The narrative prose is sloppy, colloquial and not always correct English. There are even a number of spelling errors.

On the credit side, it is a fat book with thick pages, very easy to read, with short, episodic chapters to suit readers with a low attention span.

A clue to the author's philosophy may be found on p.140:

> ... if there's any *real* truth, it's that the entire multi-dimensional infinity of the Universe is almost certainly being run by a bunch of maniacs. And if it comes to a choice between spending yet another ten million years finding that out, and on the other hand just taking the money and running, then I for one could do with the exercise.

I admit to smiling a few times in the course of reading the 590 pages and laughing once, on p.227 when some bovine creature in one of the restaurant scenes introduced himself to astonished customers with the words: "I am the main Dish of the Day. May I interest you in parts of my body?" It was a relief to find *something* funny, so I can fairly say that I didn't find it *all* bad.

FOUNDATION AND EARTH - Isaac Asimov
[Grafton, 1986, 462pp, £10.95]
Reviewed by Jon Wallace

THIS IS THE FIFTH BOOK IN THE *FOUNDation* series, and continues the saga at the point where *Foundation's Edge* left off. Golan Trevize is on Gaia and has used his ability to make right decisions based on incomplete evidence to commit the Galaxy to become one vast interconnected organism, Galaxia. As the book opens, he is agonising over this decision, and making everyone's life hell. So he decides (based on incomplete evidence) that the key to whether or not this is a sound course for Humanity to follow lies on the semi-mythical planet Earth, the place he was looking for in the first place when he stumbled on Gaia. *Foundation and Earth* is the story of that search.

Actually, it would be more accurate to say that this search is the excuse for a very thin plotline, tons of unnecessary words and three major characters who spend all their time explaining things to each other, sometimes as an auctorial afterthought ...

> "Wait!" said Pelorat, suddenly remembering, "Trevize explained that to me once. It's in ordinary ships that you have the worst of the sensation. In ordinary ships, one leaves the Galactic gravitational field on entering hyperspace and comes back to it on returning to ordinary space ... But the Far Star is a gravitic ship. It is independent of the gravitational field ..."

... etc, etc for another 26 lines. And sometimes just to fill out space ...

> "So come, Councilman, what is your mission? Let me find out if I can help you."
> Trevize said, "In this, Dr Pelorat is our spokesman."
> "I have no objection to that," said Deniador, "Dr Pelorat?"

Lots of extra words there! This padding out of the book is one of its most overriding and obtrusive faults, the whole thing has the feel of a much shorter book which has been extensively (and badly) rewritten to make it up to a stipulated length. This is a large volume (462 pages) with ideas enough for something a quarter of that length.

And it's the ideas which cause the largest amount of frustration with the book and its author. Asimov has always been noted for the scope of his imagination rather than the quality of his writing, and here he has good ideas in plenty. Ideas about the way things would probably happen which made me sit up and say, yes that's how it will be. But he has tried to build them into a framework which just doesn't have the room to hold them.

The style is stilted, the characterisation is abysmal and although any reader who managed to penetrate the first couple of chapters will be rewarded with the occasional imaginative gem, on the whole the journey from prosaic beginning to the ending (where Asimov creates a few more links between his Robot series and the Foundation series) is not really worth the effort.

THE VENUS HUNTERS - J.G.Ballard
[Gollancz, 1986, 142pp, £8.95]
Reviewed by L.J.Hurst

THE VENUS HUNTERS WAS ORIGINALLY PUBlished as *The Overloaded Man* by Panther in paperback in 1967. In 1980 they left out two stories (including the title story) and an article on surrealism, added three stories from the late seventies and published it under the present title. Gollancz have now published the collection for the first time in hardback, as they have done with Ballard's other British 60's paperback originals. I'm glad to have it.

The Venus Hunters is off-beat Ballard. Several stories are black comedies - in 'Passport to Eternity' especially the invention never falters, and 'Now: Zero' and 'Track 12', about different ways of murdering people, are grand guignol brought up to date.

The two long stories from the original group, 'The Time Tombs' and 'The Venus Hunters' are related in atmosphere and narrative style to 'The Voices of Time' but are not the same kind of work exactly. They are unusual because both deal with extraterrestrials, but they seem thinner of invention. Even so, 'The Venus Hunters' is unusual also among Ballard's work in that the main characters find what they are looking for, but in that success find their disaster.

Of the three stories added in 1980, 'One Afternoon at Utah Beach' and 'The Sixty Minute Zoom' are both about unattractive bourgeois psychotics and lack depth. But the masterwork of the volume is 'The Killing Ground', describing the future war between British resistance and the American army of occupation. From the first sentence, where in typical Ballardian fashion one word implies a massive sequence of events prior to the story's start, to the protagonist's death in the last, Ballard combines a powerful narrative, pays close detail to characterisation and writes a brilliant analysis. Other people have said it before but it deserves repeating - Ballard was there first. He's still there.

EON - Greg Bear
[Gollancz, 1986, 504pp, £10.95]
Reviewed by Mike Moir & Martyn Taylor

'IN THE GREAT TRADITION OF ...' OUGHT to appear on the dustcover of Greg Bear's *Eon* because this monster of a book is smack in the tradition of the 'Grand Masters'. Nothing about it is

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restrained or understated, from its size to its concerns - Armageddon is a sideshow here! Were it entirely successful it would be one of *the* classics, and for a good half of the book I believed Bear might have the imaginative scope to bring it to a satisfying conclusion. That he doesn't is a disappointment rather than a tragedy because he still hoists enough kites to keep most of us fascinated.

In brief the background is the sudden appearance in Earth orbit of an artificially hollowed asteroid a mere hundred and some miles long. Of course everything is not as it seems, as in 2005 the said asteroid is still minding its own business out there in the asteroid belt. Naturally we earthlings are keen to investigate and, this being an American book, the Americans get there first, discovering enough to convince them the rest of us children can't be trusted with that knowledge. The purpose of the book is, of course, to convey and explain that discovery and as Bear takes us through the exposition preparatory to the explanation his story works well. The plot bounds along. The characters function well within our expectations. The scenario is convincing and the pages seem to turn of their own accord. I really wanted to know how he was going to have a mathematician so radical in her young thought nobody could comprehend her and a Soviet space commando solve the problem of a seemingly infinite construct of probabilities.

The book falters, though, when the focus switches from 'us' coping with the greatest opportunity and the greatest catastrophe in human history, simultaneously, to Bear's human 'aliens' and their really rather petty politics, politics which have advanced hardly at all with their technology (cause and effect does not affect the process of evolution in human society, it seems). What we are shown is interesting right enough, fascinating in concept, but the writing becomes fuzzy, the storytelling loses its cutting edge, the coincidences become just too coincidental. After careful reading and rereading I am still confused about certain elements, and I don't think I ought to be. Which, as I say, is a disappointment. Nevertheless, *Eon* is a big, fat, juicy book which is worth reading. What more recommendation does it need? [M.T.]

OTHER PEOPLE HAD A LOT OF NICE THINGS to say about *Blood Music*, Bear's last novel, and now we are told *Eon* is even better. As far as I can tell, Bear is attempting to join the big league, the Nivens, Heinlein's, Herberts, Asimovs and Clarkes of this world. *Eon*, and books like it, will most likely get him there. That will no doubt make him plenty of money, but what do we get?

Eon is a book full of startling revelations, strong imagination, and is grand in scale. If you prefer these things to plot, style and characterisation, then you should read this book, you might love it.

It starts in the year 2005 with the arrival of a large asteroid-like object in earth orbit. After a number of quickfire discoveries we learn that not only is it hollow and a spacecraft of human origin, but also it comes from an alternative earth future. The next and most devastating discovery is that the inside of the hollow asteroid is apparantly infinitely long. This is Bear at his cleverest, because to counterpoint this fact he has made the whole novel hollow and apparantly infinitely long.

I have to be careful reviewing this book as even its packaging shows me it is obviously not intended for the likes of me. Bear may want to join the big league, but it is a league whose present writing I despise. This may be better than recent Niven and Clarke, but so what? However, Gollancz also choose to favourably compare *Eon* to Stapledon's works and there they go too far. The scale of the book may mimic some Stapledon, but otherwise it is entirely inferior.

The basic future scenario may be thought out quite well, but there was one major point that annoyed me particularly. In both parallel earth histories there was a contained nuclear war in 1995 and a major one in 2005. Understandably, long after them both they are known as the Little Death (4 million killed) and The Death (a few billion killed). But before The Death the earlier one is still known as the Little Death. No-one ever thought of the Great War as World War 1 until World War 2. I hate to be partisan, but dammit the Little Death did wipe out much of England and Western Europe.

It was a considerable struggle to finish this tome and I didn't enjoy it. I found it shallow, colourless and at best Bear is only a competent storyteller. The characters serve no purpose other than to react like dolls to each and every revelation. In fact the revelations are all there is and they are just thrown in regularly every 50 pages in hope of keeping your interest.

To be fair many people will get enjoyment from this book, it's just I'm not one of them. After their success with Gibson, Gollancz needed a new rising American star. What a shame it had to be Greg Bear, why not Shepard, Robinson, or even K.W.Jeter? Unfortunately the answer is simple: Mass Market Appeal. [M.M.]

THE UNLIKELY ONES - Mary Brown
[Century, 1986, 426pp, £5.95]
Reviewed by David V. Barrett

MARY BROWN HAS FALLEN SOMEWHAT UNCOmfortably between three stools with this fantasy novel. She's clearly set out to make it realistic: the characters are all flawed, have hang-ups, make stupid remarks and idiotic mistakes - just like us. And in how many fantasy novels do you come across an emotionally retarded girl coping with the trauma of her first period?

She also seems to have set out to write a parody. The characters include, among others, a rusty knight, a unicorn with a broken horn, a wicked witch, a somewhat pissed-off magician, a Cockney crow who's seen life and ain't impressed, and a garrulous goldfish. The plot overflows with hackneyed hack fantasy situations. It has to be deliberate: Ms Brown must be extracting the Michael, surely.

But the problem is, in using all these stock characters and situations, she falls into a sticky gooiness which is ultimately retch-worthy. A spoof should be clean and tight, and very carefully handled. It's no good if a parody becomes just another example of the genre it is parodying - which is what happens in *The Unlikely Ones*.

Having said all that, there were sections which left me giggling; St Cuthbert's irreverent mongrel guide, for example: "Sorry for the old bugger, really: head in the clouds, feet anywhere ... Well, beeny-bloody-dickerty, you lot!"

But over all, if you like over-the-top schmaltzy fantasy, you'll enjoy this. If not, you'll throw up.

BEST SF OF THE YEAR 15 - Edited by Terry Carr
[Gollancz, 1986, 365pp, £10.95 hardback, £3.95 paperback]
Reviewed by Nik Morton

BEST OF 1985, INCLUDING SILVERBERG'S Nebula winning 'Sailing to Byzantium; 12 in all and good value for money. Terry Carr is well known for selecting winners in his collections and, besides the excellent Silverberg, there are the redoubtable Shepard's 'A Spanish Lesson', Bishop's 'A Gift from the Graylanders' and Watson's imaginative leap, 'The People on the Precipice', all worthy of awards.

Silverberg's character, Phillips, finds himself in a future Earth which only possesses five cities - always only five, though their sites and style change as robots pull down, say, Chicago and replace it with Constantinople. Time and again I felt Silverberg was utilizing his vast amount of research for non-fiction (and fiction, viz *Lord of Darkness*) to a point of wish-fulfillment, and it worked. A love-paean to lost civilisations and, yes, to those to come. At about 60 pages it is quite long, though not long enough; literate and full of feeling, but never over the top, showing off Silverberg's, yes, *consummate* skill.

Harry Turtledove's 'Bluff' is an ironic story about an Earth expedition to a planet of Bronze Age near-humanoids who cannot conceive of *deception*. It was nicely done, the corruption of

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the natives was neatly revealed.

John Crowley's 'Snow' concerns a wasp-like device which records everything a subject does and the storage of the cine-pictures in a vault after death; the deceased's husband begins to view, but learns that he can't be selective, and the pictures are not chronological. Besides, the film snows up after viewing: perhaps man's vivid memory is still best, most precious?

David Zindell's 'Shanidar' takes place on an arctic world where reshaping humans by chemical, surgical and other means is possible; it is a quest, a parable and a love story, and works; pity about the obvious ending.

Connie Willis's 'All my Darling Daughters' is not for those who squirm at the mention of sex - it's blatant and not pleasant. The intention was to tell a story from a bad character's viewpoint, and it succeeds.

TheTiptree was about an adolescent making First Contact and how that relationship bonded the two creatures; it's sentimental, and even the downbeat ending is hope-filled.

The only real dud was Fowler's 'Praxis', in a future where play-acting was the only real world, where life seemed pretty cheap, but the decadent surreal world never came alive for me.

Space precludes writing much more. Suffice it to say, the book is recommended. But with Terry Carr's reputation as a selector, you didn't really need me to tell you that.

TALES FROM THE HAUNTED HOUSE - R.Chetwynd-Hayes (176pp)
THE SECOND BOOK OF AFTER MIDNIGHT STORIES - Ed Amy Myers (188pp)
[William Kimber, 1986, £8.95 each]
Reviewed by Terry Broome

THE SECOND BOOK OF AFTER MIDNIGHT Stories is a disappointing children's ghost anthology, including works by Ramsey Campbell and Brian Lumley. Campbell and Lumley display both quality writing and lack of inventiveness also to be found in 'French Lesson' by Patrick Biggie. Slightly better is Lanyon Jones's 'A Dickensian Christmas', concerning the rebirth of youth and love, and slightly worse is Alma Priestly's 'The Old Elm' - "mebbe" for "maybe" is used in the text, something to be avoided in a children's story. J.C.Trewin's 'Night Ferry' is appallingly written, made even more tedious by the number of asides it contains (28 sets of brackets in 16 pages, four sets on page nine alone).

There *is* one excellent story - Margaret Chilvers Cooper's 'Napoleon to Josephine' - a delightful study of Josephine, a 14-year-old who outwits her ghastly relatives and discovers her recently-deceased aunt's secret.

In comparison, *Tales from the Haunted House* contains seven stories, four of which are excellent.

A chill is quickly forgotten, as in 'The Clavering Chronicle' which depicts an actual act of sex, something which, with women's knickers, seems to be an obsession of the author's; but a *disturbing* story can reverberate in the mind for years, as with 'Alice in Bellington Lane', in which a Wonderlandish Alice never does realise the horror of where she is or what has happened to her.

These are very sophisticated stories for a children's market, but the finer details should emerge with each reading. A whimsical and cynical sense of humour and fine characterisation are present in all the stories, but especially poignant in 'Great Grandad is in the Attic' and 'Eight for Dinner'. And is it the *ghost* who finds possessing a young man unpleasant in 'The House on the Hill'?

Highly recommended.

THE WIZARDS AND THE WARRIORS - Hugh Cook
[Colin Smythe, 1986, 351pp, £8.95]
[Corgi, 1986, £2.95]
Reviewed by Ken Lake

NEW ZEALANDER HUGH COOK'S FIRST NOVEL was *Plague Summer* (1980); his next, *The Shift*, made him a finalist in the 1985 Times/Cape Young Writers' Competition and will appear early in 1987. This book, first of a series with the general title *Chronicles of an Age of Darkness*, is unfortunately described in the publisher's blurb as "a spectacular fantasy epic to rival *The Belgariad* and *The Chronicles of Thomas Covenant*.

I say "unfortunately" for two reasons: first, this is less a spectacular epic than a charming story for younger readers, replete with goodies and baddies, with every step and character set out in simple words and sentences; secondly, we're all fed up with rivals to these works which were poorly written and vastly over-hyped.

Colin Smythe is a speciality publisher whose most well-known and successful works have been those by Terry Pratchett (the most recent are *The Colour of Magic* and *The Light Fantastic*). These too had an air of "junior fun" about them, but were deeply ironic and complexly structured to illustrate the author's grasp of the really funny side of fantasy fiction. Hugh Cook, by contrast, has provided us with a juvenile adventure - and one that will appeal, I am sure, to many fans looking for a somewhat less demanding late-night read than is offered by most fantasy works.

The sentences are brief, their structure simple; the action is vivid (I liked the idea of attacking by mobilising a mountain to fight for you) and mostly traditional (magic bottles, Words of Power). The characters are all easy to understand, their motivations are clear and predictable, their reactions appealingly obvious. There are nice turns of phrase, but basically it's another Quest in which wizards take on warriorly attributes and warriors acquire wizardly skills.

I do feel most *Vector* readers will find it far too undemanding, but you should give it a try just for the sheer relaxation it brings. And do recommend it to younger readers - they'll lap it up!

THE OXFORD BOOK OF ENGLISH GHOST STORIES - Ed. Michael Cox & R.A. Gilbert
[Oxford University Press, 1986, 504pp, £12.95]
Reviewed by Rosemary Pardoe

THIS BOOK IS INTENDED TO BE THE DEFinitive collection of 'English Ghost Stories': stories in the English tradition but not necessarily by English authors. Thus Sir Walter Scott and J. Sheridan LeFanu are included along with Americans Henry James and Edith Wharton. The 42 stories are arranged in chronological order, which is useful for the insight it gives into changes in the ghostly tale over the years, but also tends to emphasise the one or two notable omissions. Of 11 pre-1900 stories only four are by women; a surprising inbalance since the editors spend some time in their introduction discussing the importance of Victorian lady writers. Mrs Oliphant's 'The Open Door' should certainly have been included. It would also have been nice to see a few more 20th century women writers, such as D.K. Broster and Marjorie Bowen.The coverage of modern supernatural stories is astonishingly marred by the omission of anything by Ramsey Campbell.

Most other types of English ghost story, however, are well represented. The three greatest writers in the genre, LeFanu, M.R. James and Vernon Lee, all appear with good stories, and there is a particularly generous selection "in the M.R. James tradition", including tales by E.G. Swain, Arthur Gray and Christopher Woodforde which have never previously been reprinted.

There are times when the choice of story doesn't do an author justice (E.F. Benson's 'The Confession of Charles Linkworth', for instance), but the editors have made several unexpected selections which have paid off. It is good to see Edith Wharton's excellent 'Mr Jones' instead of her oft-reprinted 'Afterward', and W.F. Harvey is represented not by 'The Ankardyne Pew' but by the frightening little tale, 'The Clock'.

The Oxford Book of English Ghost Stories inevitably includes a number of very well-known tales, but this is forgivable. In their fairly short but thoughtful introduction, Cox and Gilbert say "We have tried to strike a balance between the expectations of the enthusiast, to whom several of the stories will be familiar, and the needs of the reader coming fresh to the

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genre". I think they have succeeded rather well. The book is finished off with a good bibliography.

THE GHOST STORIES OF M.R. JAMES - Selected by Michael Cox
[Oxford University Press, 1986, 224pp, £12.95]
Reviewed by Rosemary Pardoe

THERE ARE 33 PUBLISHED GHOST STORIES by M.R.James. This new, large-format book contains a well-chosen selection of 15, ranging from the earliest, 'Canon Alberic's Scrapbook' (1893), to 'A Vignette' (published posthumously in 1936). James is widely acknowledged as the greatest writer of English ghost stories, and those given here demonstrate his unsurpassed ability to create a chill of horror with a few carefully and wittily selected words. To complement the stories, Rosalind Caldecott has provided a large number of illustrations, beautifully drawn in pencil. Most of these are of buildings and architectural details described in the text, but some portray scenes from the stories, all in a subtle and understated manner. They are in perfect keeping with the prose.

The stories are selected by Michael Cox, who has written a splendid and lengthy introduction. Cox is the author of the fine biography, *M.R.James: An Informal Portrait* (OUP, 1983), and for this introduction he has taken the information on the ghost stories given in the biography and enlarged upon it, both bibliographically and critically. Theprofuse illustrations include photographs of the people and places most important to James (some, but by no means all, also appear in the biography). Most interesting are some early and previously unpublished sketches by James McBryde for the first edition of *Ghost Stories of an Antiquary*. Only four drawings were completed before McBryde died in 1904, but fortunately a few sketches for the other planned illustrations have survived. Rough as they are, it is good to have them in print at last.

M.R.James died in 1936, so went out of copyright at the end of 1986. As a result we can expect to see several collections of his ghost stories soon, but few will be of any great value. Michael Cox is better qualified than anyone to compile a selection of James's tales, and *The Ghost Stories of M.R.James* is the first of two which he has edited (the second will be published in OUP's World's Classics series). These are undoubtedly the ones you should buy.

THE FOREVER MAN - Gordon R. Dickson
[Ace, 1986, 375pp, $16.95]
Reviewed by Ken Lake

I HAVE ALWAYS REGARDED GORDON DICKSON as a fine writer with some excellent ideas, and in this book he has taken two fairly common SF concepts of alien life and applied them in a fascinating manner to create races that 'live'.

Unfortunately his humans are totally unbelieveable. Worse, Our Hero is completely unlikeable! SF readers are book-oriented, thinking people; how can we empathise with a hero who is, not to put too fine a point on it, *thick*?

Having alienated our interest in this way, he creates a female protagonist who's inhuman in virtually every way, and has the two interact through a series of set pieces in which both behave like retarded 15-year-olds. Is it surprising the rest of the human race is depicted as unfeeling, unthinking, callous and pretty stupid?

Our Hero's name is Jim Wander, can you believe, and his beloved spaceship is 'AndFriend'. Like that, in one word - and *nobody laughs*! None of the characters have ever read a book, listened to serious music, had a thought that wasn't controlled by the strictest of military disciplines (what is it about freedom-loving Yanks that makes them suckers for the Army's rigid thought-and-behaviour structure?). Yet - and this beggars belief - the moment our thick Hero and his intellectual snob Heroine need to explain life's meaning, the nature of the Universe, and all that stuff, it's Jim who becomes capable of sustained intellectual interchange with an alien lifeform which lacks even the concepts 'matter', 'life' and 'being'.

Finally we have the totally unbelievable (yes, six times before breakfast!) denouement where genius Mary falls head over heels in love with moron Jim - all in the space of five seconds and before the disbelieving eyes of arch plot mover General Mollen. Sorry - four out of ten for a story that deserved eight in other hands.

Two more thoughts: first, this is so blatantly a misapplication of the concepts in Haldeman's superb *The Forever War* that I'd have expected Dickson at least to change the title.

And finally: this is the textbook example of an author setting up a bogus plot by making his characters so stupid that they cannot solve a simple problem, and attempting to hide that solution from us by giving us the same limitations written into the characters. And that's cheating!

KING DEATH'S GARDEN - Ann Halam
[Orchard Books, 1986, 128pp, £6.95]
THE CHIMNEY WITCHES - Victoria Whitehead
[Orchard Books, 1986, 143pp, £5.95]
Reviewed by Maureen Porter

KING DEATH'S GARDEN IS THE STORY OF Maurice's increasing obsession with the unconventional beliefs of a long-dead professor, his great-aunt's former employer. When they move out to the Middle East Maurice's parents leave him with her because of his asthmatic condition. Maurice has no friends. Living with such an old woman, he retreats into himself, becoming particularly drawn to the cemetery next to the house. There he accidentally discovers how to travel back in time, through the dreams of those buried in the cemetery, and meets the enigmatic Moth. Gradually, he realises that she is a supernatural being, the same one that the professor had photographed half a century earlier, but ignores her ambiguous warnings about the danger he is in.

Maurice's experiments with the supernatural are contrasted with his inability to relate to the real world. He refuses to be drawn out of his self-imposed cocoon of illness, rejecting all offers of help and friendship. The underlying message is that, however indirectly, the majority of his troubles are of his own making. He is a disagreeable child, meddling with forces he doesn't understand and prying into his aunt's affairs. Yet, his difficulties engage the reader's sympathy, and one is genuinely relieved when he finally escapes from the influence of the cemetery's occupants.

Ann Halam, better known to SF readers as Gwyneth Jones, gives us a deceptively low-key ghost story, developing the atmosphere with subtle touches, mirroring Maurice's initial disbelief and reluctant acceptance of the professor's discoveries, and only revealing the full horror of his plight when he is trapped in the graveyard. It's a welcome change to read a ghost story which still leaves some work to the reader's imagination.

The Chimney Witches is an altogether more robust story concerning Ellen's magical adventures during a hunt for a missing medallion on Hallowe'en. The narrative is full of inventive touches, and the characters are all well-drawn. The text is embellished with silhouette illustrations in the style of Jan Pienkowski, and whilst it is probably intended for younger readers I thoroughly enjoyed the romp.

THE CENTAURI DEVICE - M. John Harrison
[Allen & Unwin, 1986, 212pp, £2.95]
Reviewed by Maureen Porter

THE CENTAURI DEVICE, ORIGINALLY published in 1975, and now available again through Unwin's Orion imprint, is a curious animal. It is undoubtedly space opera, being mainly concerned with a lot of people looking for John Truck who, as the last surviving Centauran, holds the operational secrets of the eponymous device in his genetic makeup. Needless to say, the chase extends across vast portions of the galaxy.

Yet by the same token it is rare to encounter a space opera with such

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complex plotting, not to mention well-developed characterisation and carefully studied description. M John Harrison does more than simply tell his tale and leave it at that. Rather, he sketches in the decadent subculture in which John Truck is forced to move, composed of gangsters, drug pushers and flamboyant and wealthy eccentrics. He's probably the first and perhaps the only writer to create a space port society one can believe in, a society that whilst squalid is still undeniably attractive.

It has flaws. It seems clear that the author would like to break free of the restraints of his chosen form, and is more interested in the peripheral characters he's created. The plot is tortuous at times, with several extended digressions to explore the society in which Truck is living. It's worth reading, even if you don't like space opera. On the other hand, if you like space opera you won't necessarily enjoy this book.

BACKTRACK - Peter Hunt
[Julia MacRae, 1986, 136pp, £7.25]
Reviewed by Paul Brazier

THERE'S LITTLE SF OR F HERE. TWO ADOLescents, boy and girl, both had great-uncles involved in a local early 20th century train crash, set out to find its cause during their summer holidays.

The only fantasy element is where the children postulate a scenario. Hunt writes as if it were *his* narrative. Only when the other child interrupts do we realise this is only his characters day dreaming aloud. Whether this is good story-telling is a matter of opinion. However, it does create another problem.

This disruption makes the narrative appear unreliable. But as the children's investigation is exhaustive of written records *and* primary sources (the older villagers' reminiscences) which also prove unreliable, it left me uncertain as to why they came to the conclusion they did.

What bothered me most, however, was the children's attitudes to one another. Kids of this age would be far more intent on discovering each other than the truth about some minor historical event. The jacket mentions their "developing relationship", but I didn't see it. From the story, they seem sexually knowledgeable, but not aware of one another this way.

Perhaps this is a true account of this kind of child. Perhaps I have a warped view of the importance of sex in adolescence. Or perhaps this isn't a very good book. Intellectually, I'm sure a valid case can be made for this book's attitudes. I can only say it felt wrong to me.

REDWALL - Brian Jacques
[Hutchinson, 1986, 351pp, £7.95]
Reviewed by Barbara Davies

CLUNY THE SCOURGE, FEARSOME RAT WARlord with a poison-tipped tail, and his army of rats, weasels, stoats and ferrets is determined to own the abbey of Redwall. Its present owners are a peace-loving religious order of mice and other woodland creatures. The abbey was founded by the great warrior-mouse Martin whose help is now sorely needed. The young novice Matthias seems to develop in both strength and wisdom as he guides the other animals in their desperate struggle. Has Martin mysteriously returned? The story includes the quest for Martin's sword, numerous battles and adventures and a confrontation with the frightening adder Asmodeus before it is brought to its satisfying conclusion.

Redwall can be read by children of all ages. Its blurb groups it with *Duncton Wood* and *Watership Down* but in both those books the animals live and behave as animals. The anthropomorphism of *Redwall* puts it more in a class with *The Wind in the Willows*. The idyllic life at the abbey prior to Cluny's attack is illustrated by a slap-up feast which would have given any real animal severe indigestion. That said, the characters are striking and convincing. Cluny is vindictive and dangerous yet vulnerable, whereas Asmodeus is almost supernaturally evil. They ought to give a few children nightmares. Matthias and his friends provide the balance of good. The least convincing characters are the sparrows who talk like comic-strip Red Indians throughout. Why do animals always seem to be stereotyped: mice the goodies, rats the baddies and foxes the sly double-crossers? It might be interesting to try it the other way round.

Though the chapters are extremely short - with handsomely illustrated headings by Gary Chalk - *Redwall* builds up a considerable momentum. Its style is clear and concise and its characters are memorable - the baby squirrel Silent Sam will win a few hearts. It is a compelling first novel. I wonder if Disney should pick up the film rights?

HOWL'S MOVING CASTLE - Diana Wynne Jones
[Methuen, 1986, 212pp, £7.95]
Reviewed by Maureen Porter

IN INGARY, NOTHING IS QUITE AS IT seems. Howl isn't the evil magician people believe him to be, simply a reckless young wizard, susceptible to a pretty face. Sophie isn't really an old woman, but a victim of the Witch of the Waste's evil spell, and that as the result of mistaken identity. Add to this the fact that Sophie's sisters have a habit of swapping identity, not to mention falling in love with other recipients of the Witch's spells, also that Howl's fire demon wants Sophie to set him free, and the stage is set for a great deal of confusion. Eventually, good does win, and everyone lives happily ever after, as they should in all the best fairytales. This is one of the very best fairytales.

The narrative is intricate and dense, every minor incident in the book related to every other, although this isn't always immediately obvious. But Ms Wynne Jones keeps firm control throughout the novel and the economy of her plotting becomes apparent as it progresses. Her characters are very funny, very human in their weaknesses, and above all extremely believable. She also has the rare ability to turn magic into an acceptable everyday sort of thing without destroying the reader's sense of wonder.

Howl's Moving Castle is another gem from the fertile imagination of Diana Wynne Jones, and undoubtedly her best work to date, succeeding as it does in combining sly and subtle humour, attractive and believable characters and a gripping and inventive plot which keeps the reader guessing right up to the final pages of the book.

THE WANDERING FIRE - Guy Gavriel Kay
[Allen & Unwin, 1986, 298pp, £10.95]
Reviewed by Helen McNabb

I RECEIVED THIS BOOK WITH PLEASURE and anticipation. It is volume 2 of the *Fionavar Tapestry* which began with *The Summer Tree*, a book which ended in such suspense that I greeted the arrival of this with acclaim, began it with enthusiasm, and put it down in disbelief on page 34 when King Arthur was resurrected. Kay has amalgamated many mythologies to create Fionavar and my credulity reached snapping point when Kim summoned Arthur. However I could not stop reading there so I continued, albeit with dampened enthusiasm.

In many respects this is an excellent book, as was its predecessor. Kay's writing is fluent and convincing, at times even poetic, and is never jarring or pretentious. His characterisation is good, I was interested in the people in the story, and they *are* people, not mere puppets moving when the relevant string is pulled. When one of them dies I found myself crying, which says a lot about my emotional involvement with them. The plotting is less intense than in *The Summer Tree* because it has grown from the situation in that volume while setting the scene for the confrontation in the next, but it is still unpredictable, I didn't guess the ending. In all these respects it is an admirable book, but the praise is still qualified by doubts which cannot be resolved until the work can be judged as a whole.

The books are one long narrative and are not in any way independant so it is impossible to gauge the success of the author's endeavor until it is complete. My doubts lie, as they did in *The Summer Tree*, in the mythology he

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has created which, probably because it is based on so many other mythologies, has yet to take on a fully convincing independant life of its own. It might work, and I earnestly hope it does, since I enjoyed both books enormously and would be disappointed to see them fail. Kay's concept of the world as a Tapestry where all the separate strands combine to form something complete in itself is appealing and original but it's impossible to say yet whether he has created a tapestry of his own, or whether it will end up as a badly designed patchwork quilt, good in places but taken overall looking a bit of a mess.

DAD'S NUKE - Marc Laidlaw
[Gollancz, 1986, 255pp, £9.95]
Reviewed by K.V.Bailey

GALLIMAUFRY - A WORD NOT OFTEN USED now. You could apply it to this book in its OED meaning of "a ridiculous medley", though using "ridiculous" not pejoratively, but to signify comically (and blackly) preposterous. Dad Johnson is head of a family living in a west coast residential enclave. The house, guarded by automated sensors and bristling with disguised artillery, has a home-made nuclear reactor in the garage. A lead-lined baby Johnson eats the waste and excretes plutonium. Plug-in sims make absence from the neighbourhood compound rarely necessary. The plot is moved along by the physical absence of Peter John, the son who forsakes the family on discovering himself not only to be gay, but genetically programmed so to be.

Outside the Cobblestone Hill compound it's wild and dangerous country in sim as well as for real, as the Johnson family discovers when, plugged-in to its sabotaged and malfunctioning Venturon to vacation in a simulated Yosemite, it is trapped there in year-long subjective trauma.

Satire and symbolism emerge progressively more distinctly as the narrative takes shape. Consumerism is satirised in the Cartel; the fundamentalist right and other sects in Good Sam and his militants; sundry secret organisations in the Wheelwrights. Beneath the satire run veins of symbolism feeding the imagination at more basic levels. Peter John, whether in his Church of the Open Road initiation, or in the getaway, runs a maze of subconscious and dream imagery, epitomised in his guerilla-escorted escape:

> down long cement lanes through untrimmed trees, old highways overgrown with iceplant, signs moving slowly past with strange symbols on them

- warnings to turn back or take another road. He is Pilgrim Christian at the end of an age. Elder brother Virgil's wanderings - pligged-in or "real", are in a dimension where they "sail on a fragmented sea of Homericana", one "not dark with wine, but with oil and mercury". He yearns back to Euripides.

Dad Johnson himself echoes comically, pathetically, even heroically, the patriarchal archetype, with resonances of Noah and, eventually, Lot. Wonderland, Waste Land, Holy Land and the terrains of Oedipus are all detectable in the fictive substrata. Satire and symbol, farce and fantasy are so uncomfortably yet so adroitly mixed that "gallimaufry" perhaps remains the aptest word.

THE SILVER METAL LOVER - Tanith Lee
SECOND NATURE - Cherry Wilder
[Allen & Unwin, 1986, 240pp & 254pp, £2.95 & £3.50]
Reviewed by Helen McNabb

THERE SHOULD BE A WORD TO DESCRIBE books which are middle of the road, books which are readable, a pleasant but undemanding way of passing a train journey, the literary equivalent to the 'easy listening' category in record shops. Both these books come into what could be called 'easy reading', they are better than mediocre but nothing to get excited about.

The Silver Metal Lover is a romance, the love affair of a girl and a super duper adroid with something extra which makes him almost human. The book is set in an entirely credible future society drawn in considerable depth and with some subtlety. Although Jane the heroine is portrayed in much more detail than the rest of the characters who tend to be types rather than individuals, on the whole it is enjoyable, sufficiently involving to keep boredom at bay.

Second Nature is wider in scope but as it fails to fill in its blank spaces it is less satisfying. It is set in a world where a human ship crash landed a few hundred years previously and the main plot elements are the search for the escape pods of another crashed ship, the hopes that the Vail (a sort of omniscient sea monster) will reappear, and a minor love story subplot. There are also extra aliens, talk about circumnavigating the world and other bits which add little to the story and seem to have no real point. It is readable but not cohesive, it doesn't become a complete work somehow, it actually gives the impression of a longer work which has been clumsily edited to fit publishing requirements. Both books are competent, undemanding and pleasant, but are bland rather than stimulating, easy reading, nothing more.

OMEGA - Raymond Leonard
[Poplar Press, 1986, 197pp, £9.95]
Reviewed by Keith Freeman

THIS IS THE STORY OF THE INCEPTION OF a "super-computer" to direct humankind's progress from 1996 onwards. The characters seem to have little basis for their opinions on Omega, whether it will be good or bad for humanity. One character, introduced very early on, is later reported murdered - if this has anything to do with the story it certainly wasn't obvious and there are other loose ends that annoyed me.

Long "future scenarios" are too specifically detailed to be believeable. To forecast humanity's path could be possible - but not the date of a particular person's death. The whole book revolves around the argument as to whether the computer is good or evil. The eventual answer is supposedly left open, but if one reads the future ('good') prediction of the 'depersonalised' computer it's stated that Omega *could* control the minds of humans ... it therefore seems illogical that (in the alternative prediction) the 'evil' Omega didn't simply do this rather than conning humanity into obeying him until the point where Omega could destroy the ozone layer and with it humanity. What action there is occurs before Omega 'takes over' and most of the information we are given is in the form of predictions - with no explanation of why people would obey Omega when he, for example, tells the nations of the world to lay down their arms. Whole new vistas would be opened up if Omega had control of weapons - but this is not apparantly the case.

For Omega to be switched on in 1996 is reasonable, for 1996 to appear so frequently (the length of Omega's alleged usefulness, the "computer generations" to the perfect computer, the seconds required to achieve a task and a couple of other occurrences) puzzles me! The cover put me off (for no reason I can explain) and the content didn't alter my first opinion.

SCIENCE FICTION: TEN EXPLORATIONS - C.N.Manlove
[Macmillan, 1986, 249pp, £25]
Reviewed by David Wingrove

AS THE TITLE SUGGESTS, THIS EXPLORation of science fiction takes as its approach a study of ten authors - more precisely, one work by each of those authors - covering the genre's history from 1951 to 1983. Such an approach might provide us with an insight into what modern SF is. Much depends, however, on the choice of author, work and, perhaps most important, author's standpoint. Manlove is a Reader in English Literature at Edinburgh University and his previous work tackled Fantasy in much the same way that he takes on SF here. One is immediately on one's guard. Is this simply another academic 'doing' science fiction?

Having read, re-read and thought hard on the matter, I'm still in two minds. There's little doubt Manlove knows the texts exhaustively, and has done us the honour of reading around his chosen subject matter. None of these works is presented in isolation,

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but within the broader context of the author's work. That said, there's a nagging doubt that he actually understands the broader context of SF itself. I must defend such a statement, because this is a very learned volume and not without its attractions. Manlove tries not to unravel the meanings of science fiction - the usual litcrit-psychoanalytical approach of the novice professor - but to get to grips with the 'this-ness' of SF. He concentrates on world-building, the importance of images, of identity. All important concerns. But somehow something slips away, and this remains a book that will please academics more than the average reader of science fiction. Perhaps Macmillan understand as much in pricing it so highly.

Part of the disappointment is in the seemingly haphazard selection of his subjects. To begin with Asimov's *Foundation* trilogy is understandable. Aldiss's *Hothouse*, Herbert's *Dune*, Silverberg's *Nightwings*, Farmer's *To Your Scattered Bodies Go*, Clarke's *Rendezvous with Rama* and Wolfe's *Book of the New Sun* are all comprehensible choices. But then there's also Pohl's *Alternating Currents*, Simak's *Shakespeare's Planet* and A.A.Attanasio's *Radix*. These are presented as if they represent a developing tradition within the genre. As if through them we might glimpse the complexity and diversity of SF. A debate that includes Simak and Attanasio and leaves out LeGuin, Delany, Heinlein, Bester and Bradbury, gives a very odd vision of the genre. This has to be more than a quibble because Manlove tries to draw a complex definition of science fiction from these chosen threads. This is more than a collection of ten essays, it is, in a sense, an overview. And it is as an overview that I found it lacking.

On certain authors Manlove is not merely accurate but entertaining and thought-provoking. Pohl and Farmer are good value in this respect. But often his judgement is suspect, particularly in respect of *Radix*. There, more than anywhere, Manlove's miscomprehension of what makes good SF shows itself. Lacking context he seems unable to distinguish between what is derived and what is brilliantly inventive. He has done sterling work in assimilating a genre from an outsider's viewpoint, but one *knows* that he hasn't grown up with it. Well-researched as it is, it *has* been researched: there's not a natural love of the field formulating these judgements, nor a wide understanding of where invention leaves off and derivation begins.

I don't want to damn this volume. I enjoyed it. Enjoyed arguing with it and against it. And that's, in a way, a recommendation, considering how many academic books are just plain deathly. There are real insights in this volume and, thankfully, no condescension. For which, I guess, we must be grateful.

THE WATCHER - Jane Palmer
[Women's Press, 1986, 177pp, £2.50]
Reviewed by Ed. James

THE BIRD-LIKE OJALIE LIVE IN OUR GALaxy, though it seems more like a cosy back-garden. When the Star Dancer drains the Ojalie energy pools it escapes to the other side of the galaxy, "reaching its destination in less than seconds". (It travels at the "speed of thought", which in Palmer's cosmology is very much faster than the speed of light.) But Ojalie tracking stations discover its destination in seconds;

> having given up using electromagnetic radiation waves for communication millenia ago, the Ojalie were now able to to make instantaneous contact across light years, using a sophisticated elementary particle system.

Things haven't been so easy since E.E.Smith; or aliens so anthropomorphic since before Weinbaum. Must we conclude that Ms Palmer has read no SF (or science) since the thirties? Or is it, as the blurb asserts, "a joyous send-up of the SF genre"? Certainly she is no Douglas Adams or Terry Pratchett (although Joy Hibbert compared her to the former in *PF55*); she is indeed witty, in a dry, quiet, and very British way, but the subject of her wit is not SF itself, but (even when writing of the alien Ojalie) human fallibility. I find it difficult to believe that it is a "joyous send-up" at all. It reads more like a novel which deliberately ignores the rest of the SF field - or is quite ignorant of it - and merely uses some of its clichés to pursue its own ends. Which makes it fresh, interesting, and at times intensely irritating.

The plot is absurd: the Star Dancer is run to ground on earth by an android, and proves to be ...; while the android is ...; and the Watcher, one of those who govern the Laws of the universe, very implausibly, in the last sentence, turns out, well I never!, to be ... It is not the plot which makes it an entertaining read, but the characters, their quirky lives, and Jane Palmer's intelligent and ironic commentary upon them. In sum, an acquired taste, which I just about acquired on a second reading, but it bears little resemblance to any SF you've read. Unless, that is, you read and enjoyed her first Women's Press novel, *The Planet Dweller*; those who did should enjoy *The Watcher* even more.

THE OTHERS - Alison Prince
[Methuen, 1986, 208pp, £7.95]
Reviewed by Sue Thomason

THIS COMPETENT JUVENILE USES THE trappings of SF to gloss a standard 'teen reading' blend of romance and gritty realism. Ergo is a designer-bred gardener whose distinguishing features include growing string instead of hair. He lives in an underground city of workers, and goes to the Tek, where his friendly teacher understands that freethinking revolutionaries have to talk and act stupid sometimes, to fool the Bad Guys who are running things.

Ergo meets Wenti, a dress designer of the Others who has sneaked away from her privileged enclave to spy on the proles. It's Love At First Sight, and the happy couple spend the rest of the book defying parents, teachers, and assorted authority figures to demonstrate that True Love Conquers All.

But the Mills & Boon-meets-*1984* fantasy oddly overlays a disturbing reflection of contemporary experience, only slightly distorted. Ergo's father is an ineffectually violent man who suffers a stroke-analogue and goes into hospital. Ergo's mother consents to an operation which is in effect a mercy-killing, to silence him. Ergo has ambivalent feelings about his grandmother, in an old people's home. He kills her by betraying her to the Doctor. Pregnant women, summoned to the clinic for mysterious scans, only half-realise that their unborn babies are being moulded, deformed by the interaction (interbreeding?) of machine energy with biological energy.

And I realise the book is actually a picture of the inside of a real-life Ergo's head; the frustrations and fantasies of a youth at the Tech who dreams of riding the Wall of Death despite secretly despising his mates' rigid macho code. A lad who is longing to find out he's Something Special. Whether it's good or bad to write and publish such easily accessible fantasies is yours to judge. On the whole, I think any break in the armour of young male convention is good. This is the sort of book kindly teachers and librarians hand out to the lads in the B stream to try to get them reading for pleasure. I hope it works.

THE TRAVAILS OF JANE SAINT AND OTHER STORIES - Josephine Saxton
[Women's Press, 1986, 194pp, £2.50]
LITTLE TOURS OF HELL - Josephine Saxton
[Pandora, 1986, 146pp, £9.95 hardback, £3.95 paperback]
Reviewed by Paul Kincaid

ANYONE FAMILIAR WITH HER SF WILL KNOW what to expect from the first of these collections by Josephine Saxton. She doesn't so much write science fiction as a brand of surrealism, wild, ludicrous, full of coincidence, and seemingly written in one glorious flood of creativity. To read one of her stories is to embark upon an adventure through a dreamscape where the normal rules do not apply. When Jane Saint quests for her lost daughters she is accompanied by a talking dog and meets Simone de Beauvoir as part of a fairground sideshow. When the world is due to end it is the cue for parties and the assassination of the one person who might hold out hope for our survival. When

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Gordon, solitary ruler of a quarter of a planet, wishes to choose the mother of his heir from among the female automatons that attend him, it depends on a game of chess and unsuspected machinations by the women. The stories are full of feminist symbols and arguments, they are also vivacious, vivid, and untrammelled explorations of the furthest shores of our literature and our psyche.

'The Travails of Jane Saint', which takes up nearly half the book, was first issued as a short novel by Virgin in 1980, but disappeared almost immediately. The Women's Press has done us all a service by reissuing this wonderful story accompanied by five other tales. Four are further examples of Saxton's distinctive brand of free-wheeling SF, but 'The Message', perhaps the best thing she has written to date, marks a significant change of direction. It is darker, grimly realistic, full of modern urban life, touching in its unsentimental portrait of an old lady, and in the end wonderfully life-affirming.

It also points the way towards the more recent stories gathered in the aptly named *Little Tours of Hell*. This is Saxton escaping SF to write realistically about her twin obsessions, food and holidays. These are full of sharply perceived horrors, the exquisitely awful plumbing in Morocco, a disastrous spaghetti for a would-be stylish lunch party. They hark constantly back to the 40's, 50's and 60's, and to the petit-bourgeois of the North. They are nasty, acute and in the end blackly comic.

TWENTIETH CENTURY SCIENCE FICTION WRITERS - Ed. Curtis C. Smith
[St James Press, 1986, 933pp, £39.50]
Reviewed by Paul Kincaid

THIS MASSIVE VOLUME COVERS SOME 572 English language writers of science fiction since 1895, plus 38 leading foreign language writers, and five major fantasists. They include new writers like Bruce Sterling and Connie Willis, mainstream writers with one or two SF works to their credit like Lawrence Durrell, and others now all but forgotten like William Dean Howells. A typical entry includes a *Who's Who*-type summing up of life and career, a list of SF novels with note of first American and British publication, a list of non-SF novels, of uncollected short stories, and other publications. There is then an opportunity for the author in question to comment upon his own work, followed by a critical essay. As a work of reference it is as indispensible as the Nicholls *Encyclopedia*.

That said, it could easily have been even more useful. The biographical details list all awards, but don't indicate what the awards were for. The bibliographies are neither as detailed nor as accurate as they might have been - I certainly wouldn't advise any collector to pay too much attention to them. Chris Evans' entry, for example, omits his latest novel (though the book is supposed to have been revised up to 1985), and includes one short story written, presumably, by Dr Christopher Evans. David Langford's entry lists a fanzine article. As for the essays, well there's little consistency here. David Brin gets a page and a half, Lloyd Arthur Eshbach nearly a page, Christopher Evans less than a third of a column. An otherwise excellent article on Josephine Saxton pays no attention to anything written since 1971. Many of the critics are familiar to us, Gary Wolfe, Colin Greenland, others appear to have had little or no previous involvement in SF. The results are predictably varied, some are excellent capsule assessments of an author's work, others are woefully inadequate. And though the book is up to date enough for the essayist on William Kotzwinkle to refer at some length to his 1985 novel *ET: The Book of the Green Planet*, there is no reference to significant new writers such as Gwyneth Jones and Geoff Ryman.

Nevertheless, this is an excellent work of reference whose strengths far outweigh its weaknesses.

NATURE'S END - Whitley Strieber & James Kunetka
[Grafton, 1986, 418pp, £10.95]
Reviewed by Mike Dickinson

IT IS AMERICA, 2021, AND MANKIND IS ON the verge of extinction. Dr Gupta Singh, head of the Depopulationist Party, believes one third of the global population must commit suicide to save the world. Such is the power of this platform that all the world, with two exceptions, is under their control. England (tough luck you weak-kneed Scots, Welsh and Irish) and, of course, the USA hold out. Now the USA is about to cave in. Seemingly only one group opposes this incredible empire. Their leader is John Sinclair, a Convictor, who ruins reputations by forming computer simulacra of people from voice tapes, which simulacra then answer questions about the target's innermost secrets. Sinclair became a hero by exposing the unorthodox sexuality and lack of Christianity in a President. When he attempts to do the same to Singh a war ensues, which Sinclair's group seems to be losing.

The thinness of this cockeyed plot is accentuated by the inclusion in the text of great chunks of data file, interviews with travellers and by the multiple narrator scheme. It is clearly good versus evil, for Singh is "A strange foreign man with strange ideas" (p299), disapproved of by decent churchgoers, and the heroic group is fighting for "our own cultural roots - Western, humanitarian and Christian" (p2). Xenophobia becomes entrenched and is hardly disturbed by the discovery that the villain is really an American imposter. Though the fact that he is a mad scientist with a non-WASP name does devalue his criticisms of America's ruinous greed.

Like Rambo with a halo this must be balm to America's psychological wounds; to others it must appear as insolently irrelevant as the baseball "world series".

THE GOLDEN HORN - Judith Tarr
[Bantam, 1986, 272pp, £9.95]
Reviewed by Chris Barker

THE GOLDEN HORN IS THE SECOND VOLUME in the new fantasy trilogy, *The Hound and the Falcon* - and, for a change, it is a true trilogy, i.e. *The Golden Horn* is a self-contained novel and can be read without having delved into *The Isle of Glass*, though a fuller background to the principal characters can be found by reading that first book. The trilogy is centred around Alf, once a monk, and his quest to reconcile his religious upbringing with his distinctly un-human nature and powers, set against the historical backcloth of 12th century Europe. He is joined by a woman of his own kind, Thea, and the Knight/Priest, Jehan, and in *The Golden Horn* the action takes place in Constantinople at the time of its fall, during the Fourth Crusade.

The balance between history, theology and fantasy in the first book is displaced towards the historical/fantasy component in this second book. This is, in part, due to the inner changes which take place in Alf as he effects and is affected by the turmoil around him. It is Tarr's concern for character, above even the original historical background, which lifts this trilogy above genre mediocrity. One might accuse her of an over-simplistic style - however, in avoiding the halfway house of pseudo-medieval prose, she is able to capture the historical events in a fresh way which actually brings them to life.

The Golden Horn is a novel of character, and the tension experienced by Alf is substantially dissipated in this second novel. Therefore one cannot help wondering whether the author can maintain the standard she's set herself in the concluding volume. From the evidence so far, however, I await the final book with anticipation rather than trepidation.

O-ZONE - Paul Theroux
[Hamish Hamilton, 1986, 469pp, £10.95]
Reviewed by Jim England

PAUL THEROUX IS WELL-KNOWN FOR HIS best-selling travel books, and a fair number of novels, starting with *Waldo* in 1967. Although not described by the author, or publicised, as such (he appears to have a low opinion of most SF, understandably) *O-Zone* is SF by

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any reasonable definition.

To summarize very briefly: group of wealthy New Yorkers in t future celebrate New Year by taking trip into a radioactively contaminat area of the mid-west called O-Zon The trip is described in great deta but virtually nothing happens. But so a second trip to O-Zone is made Allbright, with his 15-year-old geni nephew, Fizzy, who finds himse stranded there. Suddenly, things sta to happen and go on happening satisfactorily exciting fashion rig up to the rather unsatisfying endin My main complaint is that Theroux delineation of this future society the opening sections is stupefying dull to read. He does not like to ma life easy either for himself or for h readers. Most writers start a nov with a small number of character Theroux starts this one with over ha a dozen, of whom he is slow to gi descriptions, and who take turns making utterances which are eith banal or do not make sense to t reader for a hundred or more pages. small doses this curiosity-provoki stratagem is familiar to every reader, but here it is over-used to t extent that it can induce a kind emotional anaesthesia. A sma quotation from the first page of t novel may suffice to illustrate:

> 'No Starkies, no Skells, no Troll Hooper Allbright said over his radio the rest of them. 'No Shitters, Diggers, no Roaches, Not even Federals!' He was photographing it through the sting in his nose cone. 'I don't see any Owners either,'

The reader who expects all the terms to be explained is due disappointment. A number of elemen in the plot background also stra credulity. Would an area as mild contaminated as O-Zone actually gl in the dark? If as radioactive described, why are the inhabita affected so little? Why does no-one think to use a Geiger counter? E supposing 15-year-old Fizzy to be genius in the field of theoreti physics, whould he be able to m discoveries in particle physics? It seems rather over-the-top. These cr icisms having been made, however must say that the author's ability to make readers want to suspend disbel is excellent, his scene-setting meticulous (if long-winded) and writing is highly professional, w flashes of apparantly effortl brilliance. If you are not put off by the long-windedness of the fi hundred or so pages, can sur repetition, lack of explanation, explicit sex and the description trip to Africa which contributes li to the plot you will probably reading *O-Zone* a memorable and rew ding experience. You may even un stand the statement on the front blurb: "The past is a mystery, but future is familiar." And the fact the story is set in the future is "almost an irrelevance." (I confess: I didn't.) Half-heartedly recommended.

THE PRODIGY - Amy Wallace
[Macmillan, 1986, 297pp, £10.95]
Reviewed by David Wingrove

MOST PRODIGIES, IT SEEMS, ARE LITTLE more than walking-talking calculating machines, often with the gift of a perfect memory. Few maintain their meteoric course into adulthood, even fewer prove genuinely innovative. William James Sidis, born 1898 and the subject of this book, is one of those rare exceptions to the rule.

The son of gifted parents who encouraged and trained him to think logically from the very start, nature and nurture combined with frightening efficiency. By three he was a fluent reader and writer, could use a typewriter, research in encyclopedias, and - perhaps the *coup de grace* from this period - taught himself Latin as a birthday present for his father. By five he was fluent in Greek, Russian, French, German, Hebrew, Turkish and Armenian. In adult life he could pick up a new language in a day.

But Sidis was an exception in his use of the things he learned. He not only found it easy to grasp concepts, but found new ways of combining and using them. In 1910, aged eleven, he lectured to the Harvard Mathematical Club - perhaps the leading American forum for mathematical ideas - on Four-Dimensional Bodies which strained the comprehension of the listening professors. His teachers - eminent and respected men - guaranteed that Sidis would be the intellect of his age. And so, perhaps, he was, but it was not evident from his achievements.

Sidis was not a normal child. He had few friends, and at home little love or attention. His mother showed him off at parties, his esoteric father (a contemporary and rival of Freud) talked ideas at him. Neither prepared him for or defended him from the sneering ridicule of the press. Time and again he was pilloried and made the butt of cruel cartoons. These factors drove him into rebellion and, subsequently, a kind of exile. He spent the rest of his life taking menial office jobs - usually ones where he could operate a simple hand calculator and not think about what he was doing - while he pursued his various hobbies.

He was perhaps most remarkable for his complete rejection of all the trappings of success. He could have been rich - a doctor offered him $3000 in the 30s for 45 minutes work which only he might have done. He could have been the foremost scientist of his day - his one published work of science, *The Animate and the Inanimate* (1925), formulated the theory of black holes some 14 years before *any* other work was done on the subject. He could have been socially influential - his parents' sanitarium catered for the cream of American society. That he was none of these has less to do with his failings as an individual - substantial as these apparantly were - and more the failings of a materialistic society unable to recognise the special nature and needs of such a gifted person.

Unsurprisingly, he was a science fiction fan and wrote two novels and several short stories. Again typically he never sought publication. His life story has all the fascination of an SF novel, but with the added sting that this is pure, hard fact. It's a book to make you think hard; a study of the alien amongst us, a mind in exile. Powerful, thought-provoking, I wholly recommend it.

SOLDIER OF THE MIST - Gene Wolfe
[Gollancz, 1986, 335pp, £10.95]
Reviewed by Sue Thomason

THIS BOOK IS THE FIRST VOLUME OF A historical fantasy sequence set in the Hellas of the 5th century BC. Latro, a mercenary soldier in the army of Xerxes, suffers a severe head injury at the battle of Thebes in 497 BC, resulting in the obliteration of his day-to-day memory. He can remember his mother and father, and the house where he was born, but not his friends or actions of the previous day. His affliction is the result of the anger of the Earth Goddess, and carries a corresponding gift; Latro can see and speak to the Gods as they walk about the earth, and any God or Goddess that he touches becomes visible to other humans as well. In order to function more or less normally in his search for a cure, Latro starts to write down what he has been doing every day, so that he can read over his work the following day and remember who he is and where he's going. *Soldier of the Mist* is the first part of his writings.

In some ways, the book strongly echoes Wolfe's *Book of the New Sun*. The protagonist is a man without a past, who wanders about the countryside having experiences whose significance he doesn't realise at the time, collecting and losing companions in response to the pull of some strongly-felt but unintelligible destiny. He is a man distanced from the everyday world, he is new to things that everyone else takes for granted. He is a marginal man, an outcast if not an outlaw.

But new to *Soldier of the Mist*, and a great strength of the book, is the very well realised historical setting, which Wolfe brings home with great immediacy by translating most of the personal and place names, and thus avoiding their classical (and Classical) associations. The details of Latro's day-to-day life ring solid and true, and his encounters with the Gods are oddly resonant.

I think this is probably a very good book. I know I enjoyed reading it tremendously. I recommend it, and await further volumes with interest.

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his more speculative ideas. He proposed that Earthly life could have begun from molecules delivered by infalling comets. He wrote two novels exploring the idea that communication between interstellar civilisations would proceed by sending instructions for building special computers. He fought a long rearguard action in favour of the Steady-State theory, often inventing ingenious ways to conjure up the microwave background radiation and keep the essentials of the theory.

The Black Cloud sets forth perhaps his best known wild idea. It makes plausible the notion of a purely physical origin for life, with no necessity for biological processes. In principle this is possible, since life at its most general demands only a flow of energy through a system which can spontaneously organise itself into more complex forms. I suspect that Hoyle wanted to shake up his colleagues with this novel, rather than propose an idea which could be studied immediately. However, he has since published papers about the formation of complex chemical forms in interstellar clouds, and the possibility that life could arise there. The papers have been attacked, and Hoyle has replied with pointed and witty rejoiners.

All through his varied career he often seemed to enjoy playing the underdog, or taking up similar causes. When fellow Cambridge scientists Martin Ryle and Anthony Hewish won the Nobel prize, principally for the discovery of pulsars, Hoyle strongly protested in the *Times* that Hewish's graduate student, Jocelyn Bell, had been wrongly ignored. She had in fact spotted the regular radio pulses that led to the discovery. Omitting her from the prize was a spectacular example of Establishment stupidity.

I occasionally talked with Hoyle during my own graduate career, and came to see his novels as expressions of a more general attitude toward Establishment science and power. As his Kingsley remarks, "Don't I keep telling everyone that our whole social system is archaic, with the real knowledge at the bottom and a whole crowd of bobbleheys at the top?" This, too, paralleled CP Snow's famous Two Cultures speech in 1959, which pointed out that lack of integration between humanistic and scientific worldviews damaged society. Indeed, Hoyle went further than Snow. He felt that the scientifically trained are better suited to govern than the arts-educated, since technical studies are less tied to emotional questions, and thus such people could bring a certain coolness of judgement to hotly contested issues.

These views echo John W Campbell, the editor who led the Golden Age of magazine science fiction. Indeed, Hoyle has led a life Campbell would have liked -- original, speculative scientist, "hard" science fiction author, maverick. We might think of Hoyle as the first person to do what so many science fiction figures ached to do, all the while keeping his sardonic distance from the conventional wisdom.

I recall asking Hoyle if Chris Kingsley's name hinted at Kingsley Amis, one of the Angry Young Men who were coming to prominence then (and also an early herald of science fiction as significant literature, in his *New Maps of Hell*, 1960.) He answered that he could not recall, that details about his fiction faded quickly after the work was done. What has not faded is the importance of *The Black Cloud*, with its grand ideas cast in a plain, flat style. The novel's opening chapters often catch the characters in motion, travelling (as jet-set scientists do) to keep on top of a fast-breaking idea. Hoyle's simple demand that science fiction not yield incessantly to melodrama, that it render with fidelity how scientists think and talk and struggle for power -- these facets have persisted in science fiction. Though I had not returned to the novel since my first reading in 1958, I can see clearly that its influence stayed with me. I used Hoyle as a real figure in my novel *Timescape*, and mined my memories of his seminar style for fictional characters in it, too.

The Black Cloud uses a dual strategy -- scrupulous attention to how scientists really are, balanced against a genuinely bizarre idea. This quiet little book wrought major changes in how "hard" science fiction could be written, casting a pale gaze upon those gaudy starship captains and mad scientists of the past★

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