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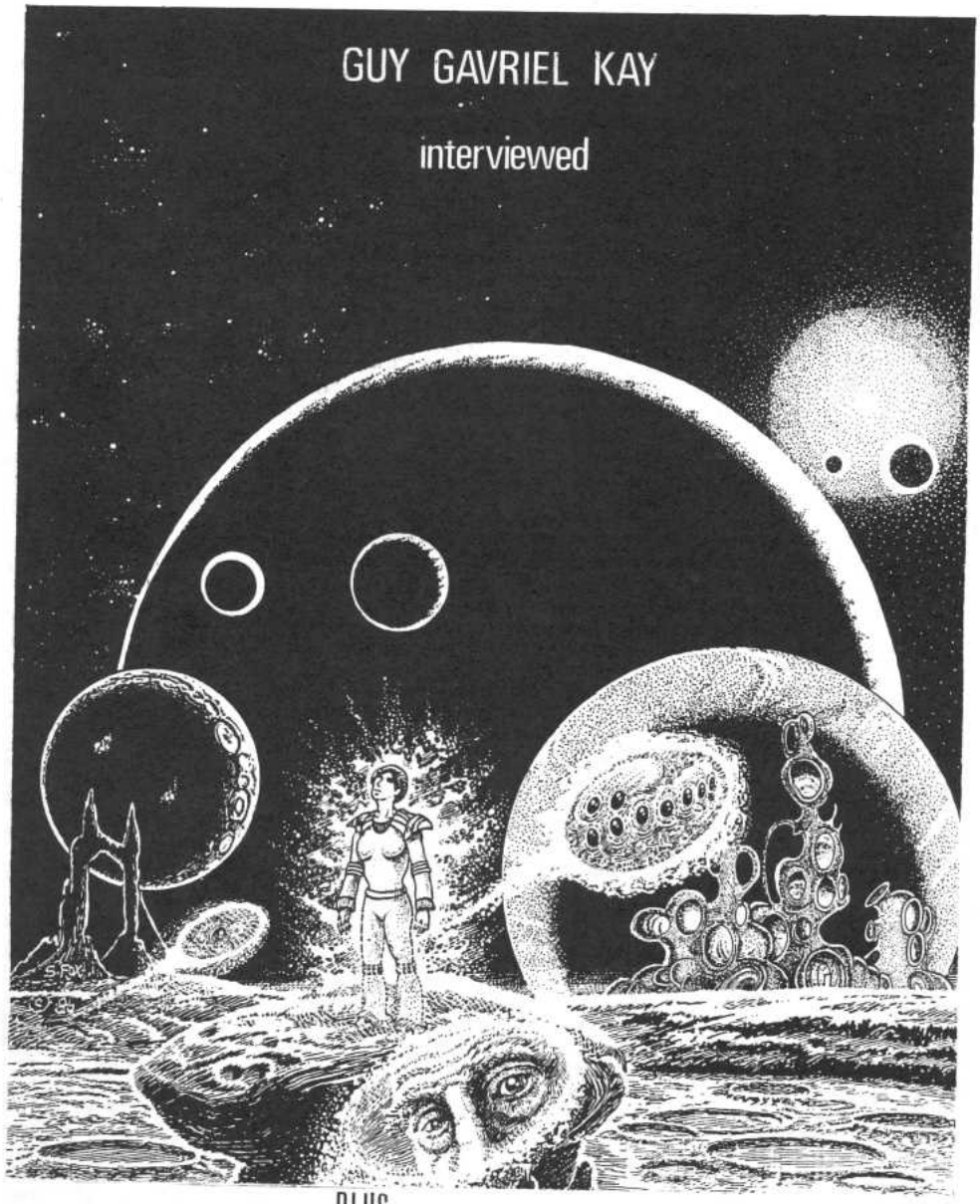
interviewed



PLUS

GHOST IN THE PEN II

LETTERS & BOOK REVIEWS

APRIL / MAY 1987

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C O N T E N T S

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EDITORIAL

WHO KNOWS BEST?

Guest Editorial by Paul Kincaid

AT THE TIME OF WRITING THIS I SEEM TO BE TOTALLY immersed in awards. I'm considering my judgement in the Arthur C. Clarke Award, counting the nominations for the Hugo Awards, and of course I've just cast my vote for the BSFA Awards. I find myself, at the same time, surprised by how much overlap there is between the three, and by how little overlap there is. Some books crop up in all three, others show strongly in one but disappear completely in others.

Of course, one should expect some difference between them. After all, the constituency of the three is different, the Clarke Award, for instance, is for a book receiving its first British publication during the year, and is chosen by a panel of six critics, whereas the Hugo is for a book receiving its first world publication during the year (so a number of Clarke finalists which were first published in America during 1985 are ineligible) and can be voted on by anyone who is a member of the World Convention no matter where in the world they come from. So we shouldn't be surprised if there isn't that much overlap.

Yet, shouldn't there be more than the occasional title cropping up in different lists? Aren't we all choosing the same thing? Aren't all three processes meant to arrive at the same end: the best science fiction book of the year?

To answer in reverse order: Yes, Yes and No!

If that puzzles you, think about it for a moment. Then tell me how you decide the best science fiction book of the year. What are the criteria we use? Does the science or the fiction come first? And where, on that nebulous axis between the two, does our measure of quality lie? Three times, for as many awards, I will have to decide my own answers to those questions, and I don't suppose they will be exactly the same in any two instances. Since there is no agreed definition of science fiction, there can be no agreed criteria for deciding the best of the genre.

Let's take a look at a couple of books that haven't made the Clarke or BSFA short lists (though, since the Hugo shortlist is far from finalised at the time of writing, there's no telling what may happen there). *Staring at the Sun* by Julian Barnes is a splendidly literate novel that covers the period between the middle years of this century and the middle years of next. It is a sharp and touching examination of the life of one woman, and though its final third ventures into the future that alone would not define it as science fiction, even by my catholic reckoning. But within that section a central rôle is played by a supposedly omniscient computer. It is a pure SF device, but having created it Barnes does nothing with it. It serves a plot purpose, but he clearly has not visualised either its presence or its working, and there is no sense at all that it has had any effect whatsoever upon the society around it. Were an award purely a recognition of literary merit then *Staring at the Sun* might well find itself on the short list, but something is missing that prevents it being good SF.

On the other hand *The Invaders Plan* by L. Ron Hubbard is everything the old gung-ho scifi was thought to be. It's big and sprawling and full of incident, and it's bursting at the seams with weird ideas and alien wonders. That it has all the literary merit of a carrot is beside the point. This is adolescent fantasy sensawunda adventure. It's like 'Doc' Smith and his colliding galaxies, amazingly big and wonderful and like wow! But good SF doesn't just make the jaw drop open, it's not there simply to stir the blood, it's meant to stir the mind as well, to make both the imagination and the intellect click into overdrive. If the award did no more than register thrills and spills and outrageous gadgets, then *The Invaders Plan* might have got the vote, but somehow it still misses out on being good SF.

Simple, then: good SF involves a balance of the two, the ideas and the literature, the science and the fiction. Yes, but that doesn't actually get us very far. Look at the Clarke short list. Eight books, all of which lie between our two extremes, all of which achieve that mystical balance, and all of them as different from each other as it is possible to be.

The Handmaid's Tale by Margaret Atwood and *Green Eyes* by Lucius Shepard both incline towards the literary end of the spectrum, but where Shepard goes for a prose style as lush as the overgrown bayous in which his story is set, Atwood's is lean and precise and chillingly detatched. And both reach that point by very different routes. Shepard comes out of science fiction, but sets his tale of the dead revived barely a heartbeat into the future and clothes it in very careful writing. Atwood has established a considerably reputation outside science fiction and achieves her literary effects with consumate skill; in this instance, clearly, she has had to devote far more thought to the story than the writing. For this is her first venture into the genre, and she uses it to make a telling political point about the rôle of women in society, yet it isn't a tired soapbox but a careful working out of the future society she has chosen, and a thorough consideration of the ramifications of all the changes she makes to our future, in the approved manner that all our best science fiction writers are supposed to do.

Feminism and politics also lie behind two of the most idiosyncratic books on the list, *Queen of the States* by Josephine Saxton and *Escape Plans* by Gwyneth Jones. Both are prime examples of all that science fiction can achieve once the full freedom of the genre is recognised. But again there could hardly be two dissimilar works. Where Saxton is wild, Jones is controlled, where Saxton's work is a sustained and surreal flight of fancy, Jones is careful to make each development of her plot lead on rigorously and inexorably from what has gone before, where Saxton's prose is light and witty, Jones' is rich and delicate. Saxton is deeply immersed in science fiction, yet uses its images carelessly as icons and symbols, it doesn't matter if we believe that Magdalen really has been kidnapped by aliens, the point is still made. Jones is still relatively new to the genre, yet she is painstaking with her use of its devices, even providing a glossary of the language she has invented, though the tale hidden under all this is actually the conversion of St Paul. They seem to be heading off in

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diametrically opposite directions, yet both end up at the same place, achieving the same effects.

Others are more conscious of traditional SF. Bob Shaw in *The Ragged Astronauts* and Kim Stanley Robinson in *The Memory of Whiteness*, for instance, both follow familiar paths. Robinson takes us on a tour of the solar system, full of casual but assured comments upon and descriptions of scientific advances that have taken his world far from our own. Shaw, on the other hand, pictures an alien world that allows him to relish the casual display of wonders that is such a hallmark of his books. The central image of his book, travel between worlds by hot-air balloon, is a glorious conceit on a level with slow-glass. Yet the strange planets are not the be-all and end-all of Robinson's novel, nor are the wonders the sole purpose of Shaw's. They use the devices merely as jumping off points for books that do much else besides. Hidden away within Robinson's grand tour are some neat points about the language of music, the shapings of society, and the images of religion. He uses SF to picture man the social animal, the way people interact. Shaw, on the other hand, is as ever at his best describing character, the individual, and uses the SF devices not to draw his characters together but to isolate them, highlight them. It may be traditional science fiction, but their surfaces both lean strongly towards the science while underneath they are suddenly revealed to lean strongly towards the fiction.

And there are yet two more that seem to subscribe heartily to the old SF verities, the catalogue of wonders, the high ratio of amazements to pages. Yet could anyone imagine more dissimilar books that *Stars in my Pocket like Grains of Sand* by Samuel R. Delany and *Eon* by Greg Bear? Both do what SF is generally seen as doing, both take us out into the limitless tracts of space, to the very frontiers of comprehension. Delany takes us far into the future, to a vast array of alien worlds, altered humans, hugely different societies, all minutely described. Living rooms are bare, but images make them appear spacious and comfortable. There are technological wonders galore. Bear takes us less far into the future, but still manages an asteroid that is infinitely long, tricks and twists of space-time, alien worlds and creatures, altered humans, diveregent time-lines. Again living rooms are bare, but images make them appear spacious and comfortable. There are technological wonders galore. In ideas, in content, they are so much alike, but in fiction? Delany's slow, precise, weighted prose is a world away from Bear's slick, fast, adventurous story-telling. If they reveal one truth, it is how many different ways there are of doing the same thing.

And that is the problem with chosing the Best. Every one of these books is the best science fiction of the year, but each one is writing a very different science fiction. And the list doesn't stop there, take a look at the other books from the BSFA short list: *Schismatrix*, *Count Zero*, *Blood Music*, the same is just as true of them. SF can do an infinity of things in an infinite number of ways. But it remains a mixture of science and fiction. Without the ideas it fails, without a clear idea of the world it is creating, for it must remain at heart a literature of change. Yet ideas alone do not make good SF, for it remains fiction and must fulfill the functions of fiction. It must make us see the place described, believe in the people caught in the events, accept the sequence of events presented to us, be convinced by the whole. After all, it is through the fiction that the science, the ideas, the changes are presented. Without one, the other fails.

It all comes down to balance, a weighing of one against the other. But what is the optimum proportion of science to fiction? Where does the balance lie? Who knows what is best?

L E T T E R S

«A LOT OF GOOD LETTERS THIS ISSUE: THANKYOU. MY THANKS also to ER James, editor of Foundation, *who wrote to me: "[V136] was a splendid issue with each article good enough to be in any pro-mag." That's how I'd like every issue to be -- but that's largely up to you, the members. It's you who write most of the articles. Write to me with your ideas, in areas such as religion in SF, science in SF, the didactic function of SF, socio-economic &/or political systems in SF, war in SF, sex in SF, humour in SF... or your re-evaluations of "classic" works, or your discovery of a little-known gem. I'd also like your questions to put to SF publishers' editors.*

And keep on writing those letters...»

SOME INTERESTING LETTERS IN *V135*.

The reason I get uptight when people refer to the genre as "sci-fi" is not because I object to people enjoying the lower end of the market, but because non-readers who use the term sci-fi invariably believe that there is no upper end of the market or, for that matter, a middle end (if you'll excuse the phrase). Sci-fi (and thus, SF and science fiction) to them is unimaginative, badly written, stereotyped rubbish with bad covers. They can't understand why a person of reasonable intelligence would read such stuff, and so they politely avoid the subject, and thus can't be got through to.

What is most irritating, to me, is that these people invariably have at least one literary, semi-literary or just plain old SF novel on their shelves. What is also irritating is that they often can't see connections between SF and other genres. For example, any story written about humanoids on another planet (Darkover, *The Left Hand of Darkness*, the "Whileaway" stories) would, a few hundred years ago, have been set on a lost Pacific island, but this takes some explaining. To put it briefly, instead of seeing SF as the literature of extrapolation, they see it as a form of mindless violence literature. And because they have this idea in mind, they are often unable to read any class of SF at all. This is irritating, and wasteful.

Mark Ogier is right in saying that if the BSFA wants a bigger membership it will start having to cater for sci-fi readers. Likewise, to get an even bigger membership you could start praising Perry Rhodan, Gor novels and Fighting Fantasy books. It's a question, really, of how far you're prepared to lower your sights, bearing in mind also that it isn't necessarily a simple division into SF and sci-fi; there are several definitions of where SF stops and sci-fi starts, all the way down to criticising *Battlestar Galactica* for not being *Blake's Seven*.

Re your comment to Jim Goddard -- there's also the point that there's readable and unreadable crap. Some of my favourite authors aren't the height of literary respectability: Bradley, to name but one. On the other hand, there are some writers, according to taste, who are not the height of literary respectability, and who are also practically unreadable. I would count Rhodan and Gor novels among these.

L E T T E R S

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«There's no question of Vector *lowering its sights; it's my hope that by being more positive about books & authors worthy of praise, we can raise the sights of those readers who are able to curl up happily with a Gor book, and wean them away -- rather than driving them away.*

In V136 I referred to "meretricious garbage", and thought I ought to define "meretricious". KV Bailey goes one step further:»

"GARBAGE" IS A MISSILE NOW SO WIDELY DEPLOYED THAT IT IS perhaps useful to follow your example in the matter of "meretricious" (the comment on Robert Steele's letter in *V136*) and locate the word in the thickets of the *Shorter Oxford* -- this dictionary game being compulsive. There its common usage is, of course, given: "Refuse in general, (in US *esp.* kitchen etc. refuse); also *fig.* of literary matter"; but there, too, is a note on its probable derivation from the Old French: *garbe*, a sheaf. (What price a sheaf of fiction?)

In fact, that derivation gave rise to garbage's now obsolete, but in our context neatly relevant meaning: "wheat straw and the ears, chopped small as food for horses -- 1617"; in other words what remains once the seed, the nutritive essence, has been extracted. It takes a touch of genius to get yet another harvest of sustaining grain by creating alternate histories, but Keith Roberts does it; or by travelling in time, but Tim Powers has done it; transmigrations and metamorphoses -- Ian Watson; "four seasons in the mind of man" -- Brian Aldiss. They and their like feed us what there is to be had of the good oats and corn. (Ignore the idiomatic nuances of those words!) If we are still hungry, or just gluttonous, there is plenty of the "chopped small" fare to be had at our own choice and risk -- and a modicum of it is not unacceptable for "the long train journey", robots, aliens, dragons, saucers, sorceries and all.

Cliché though the phrase may be, that "long train journey", as references in the editorial of *V136* and book reviews in that number and in the contemporary number of *FI* would suggest, occupies a firm place in the fan's life, as he/she travels from convention to convention or simply commutes. In various jobs at various times I've had my share of the long haul but, being in a small way a railway buff, and an historian of sorts, I was always reluctant to miss, for example, the experience of the great Harringworth Viaduct, or the quickly vanishing glimpse of Durham, or the instant-long west-front view at Peterborough -- or even the last call for lunch -- by being profoundly lost in Shikasta or Anarres. Thus, a quick hike around the galaxy, or some fleeting dalliance in a Celtic never-land, offer prompter exits than do those deep intercity hiber-visions induced by the masters.

Air journeys are different. In that particular limbo the imagination welcomes entry into other dimensions of reality: immersion into *Interzone* rather than scanning the glossier bits of *Omni*; *Neuromancer* rather than the romancers. The same goes to some extent for night travel by rail; yet even on those journeys there's a pleasure in identifying whatever cluster of urban lamps, glow of furnaces, or rushed-through lighted station; and this the scant attention called for in the consumption of "wheat straw" permits. Hence, the paper "sheaves" on the racks in booking-halls, for me at least, day or night, serve a purpose.

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VECTOR 136 WAS A TERRIFIC ISSUE. AS THE WRITER OF THREE and a half novels and a handful of short stories, I was interested in your Editorial on the writing of fiction and non-fiction. As regards non-fiction I wholeheartedly agree that it becomes more difficult with increase of knowledge. As regards your thesis that the writing of fiction is also hard work, there seems to have developed in the past decade or so a kind of pretentiousness on the part of writers (some) which is the precise opposite of that kind fashionable in earlier times, when great writers were supposed to "dash off" literary masterpieces, "inspired by the Muse".

Many writers nowadays boast of what hard work their writing is, with the suggested implication that because they work hard and write many drafts, what they finally produce must be a gem, polished to perfection. Conversely, they suggest, any writer who is satisfied (to a large extent) with his own first drafts must be a fool; they cannot possibly be any good. This is obviously untrue. In the creation of any work of art, the creator does not in every sense "know what he is doing", i.e. the results of his labour do not come solely from the operation of his conscious mind. Thus, apart from ensuring that his English is more or less correct, it may be that the less he does to tamper with them in the way of re-drafts, the better! Dostoevsky hardly ever rewrote anything.

In the same issue, Garry Kilworth tries to have it both ways. He mentions improvement by "constant practice and hard work" but also writing "in a state of white heat". His statement "I would start a bar-room brawl over the short story. I might even kill for it..." is impressive and not at all pretentious, but it says a lot about Garry Kilworth. So does his pronouncement that a short story "needs to reach inside and twist the guts".

I don't know about you, but I don't like having my guts twisted. When I think back over the thousands of short stories I have read, the ones I judge the best were not gut-twisters (although gratuitously unpleasant stories do, of course, tend to linger in the mind) but stories whose appeal was to the heart and head, like Eric Frank Russell's "Hobbyist".

JIM ENGLAND
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«I don't think Garry meant "gut-twisting" to equate with "gratuitously unpleasant" -- at least, I didn't read it that way. Dorothea Brande, in her excellent book Becoming a Writer *(1934, Macmillan 1983), makes a major point about "the two persons of the writer": the unconscious and the conscious, the artist and the artisan, the intuitive and the analytic. White heat and constant practice have to go together.»*

THREE CHEERS FOR GARRY KILWORTH -- A VIGOROUS DEFENCE OF the short story has been long overdue. I would, though, disagree with his opening sentence: "Outside science fiction and fantasy, the short story is barely breathing." I would say that outside the Grand Duchy of SF & F, the short story is very much alive -- if not exactly well -- in the clammy grasp of TV. Suffice to say that, along with the micro-mini plays of advertising and the disco/radio-orientated pop song-tale, story-telling has been distorted to the purpose of selling you commodities, cults, styles and, eventually, yourself.

As to the source of ideas, I agree that their development is a learned process whereby the tired and hackneyed plots are winnowed out. But I would say that the source of the central idea is a "magical" occurrence, in that novelty cannot be rationally or causally explained, only intuitively grasped.

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L E T T E R S

IN HIS ARTICLE IN *V136*, GARRY KILWORTH HAS PUT INTO WORDS what I've been trying to articulate for a couple of years now. When I discuss the short story with people, I almost always find myself defending it against such comments as: "If you've got a decent idea, why mess about with short stories? You might as well expand it into a novel," or "I'm going to turn my latest short story into the first chapter of a novel," or "Short stories are good things to practice on before you go onto the serious business of writing novels".

No, no, and no. The short story is as distinct from the novel as is the poem. It is a separate form. It is not a stepping-stone, it is not a poor relation. If you want to see why a short story is not a novel, read Daniel Keyes' "Flowers for Algernon". Read the short version first, then see what happened to it when he tried to turn it into a novel.

I am a very young writer; I have a long way to go and a lot to learn. I originally decided to concentrate on writing short stories simply because I didn't have the time to write novels. But, having begun to study the form, I have become fascinated by it. If I saw Garry in a brawl over the short story, I'd come in on his side. I have become converted. But, in my studies of the short story, I am looking at only a handful of SF writers: Ellison, Kilworth, Bradbury, Tiptree. Most of the rest don't seem to know, except very superficially, what a short story is. So I've turned to Chekhov, to Maupassant and Katherine Mansfield, and several others. People who weren't so obsessed with ideas that they abandoned form and style and everything else in an endless search for "originality".

I used to get frustrated reading SF, and not know why. But the reason lies here: so few SF writers have paid any attention to the major advances in story-telling technique, advances made over the past hundred years by the best writers in the world. It seems that in searching for a method, scientific principles alone have been brought to bear: there is a right and a wrong way; story-telling techniques can be reduced to formulae; a logical plot is more important that emotional content. But it doesn't work that way.

Ideally, SF stands at a unique crossroads, where art and science meet. The short story, with its infinite adaptability, is perfectly suited to deal with the resonances set up at this meeting-place.

I am young and ignorant, but I have found this crossroads, and I intend over the years to explore many of the paths leading from it. I am happy to have discovered that at least one person has got here before me. I hope that every SF writer will read Garry's article, and will listen to what he is saying.

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VERY GOOD TO SEE GARRY KILWORTH STANDING UP FOR THE short story, though I think he exaggerates the extent to which its existence is threatened. True, magazines and original anthologies are very scarce when they were once plentiful; but you don't *have* to be South American to get a collection published. The North Americans that will now be forever known by the lamentable lable "dirty realists" tend to favour the form. Faber, Secker, Virago and Chatto all list single-author collections in their current catalogues. What Kilworth is right about is the scarcity of books of short stories at the popular end (rather than the literary end) of the fiction spectrum. And I think he's absolutely right about the corresponding plethora of "fat, readable" novels.

What occurs to me, living a bit closer to London than he does, is the suitability of short stories for *tube* train journeys, and other self-contained bits of reading time in the lives of people who like to have a book on the go -- last thing at night, for example; in queues and waiting rooms. What I see is these areas wholly dominated by newspapers that don't inform and magazines that trivialise. Lots of readers tell me they actively like to read short stories. So why do publishers insist that books of them don't sell?

An editor on a fiction magazine rang me to ask for a story this week, and when I lamented that I write so few, sympathised: "Well, you're doing *important* things, like novels." I hastily add that she's only a temporary editor on the magazine; that she probably thought she was flattering me, while yearning to write novels herself; and that, at the pathetic rates her magazine apparently pays, the word "important" might well have been intended to be interpreted in a financial context only! But still... There's definitely a prejudice there that Kilworth was wholly justified in attacking.

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«It's good to get so much response to an article; Garry clearly struck chords with a number of readers. Incidentally, the new London Daily News *is apparently printing short stories regularly: for once, a new market. Now for a few comments on the rest of* V136*:»*

I must admit that my first reaction to Jim England's pseudo-review of *The Hitch Hiker's Guide to the Galaxy* was that he should be hung, drawn and quartered. On reflection, I realised that a more appropriate fate would be a week's incarceration with a Vogon poet. This latter fate might at least teach him that the ability of language (English in particular) to be distorted and corrupted, and yet remain interpretable, if not intelligible, is one of the main weapons in the creative writer's arsenal - *vis* such shining examples as Joyce's *Ulysses*.

I would agree that a strong streak of cynicism, and a liking for black humour, helps one to appreciate Adams's work. However, to call the humour "shallow" is a comment not on the writing but on Jim England's apparent inability to distinguish between ideas born of his own prejudices and those contained in the work which he purports to have analysed.

Consider, for example, the Sirius Cybernetics Corporation and its products, including the immortal (almost) Marvin. This combination is a very subtle piece of humour indeed. On the one hand we have the SCC -- an embodiment of all that people fear and despise about megacorporations: impersonal, arbitrary, inefficient, overbearing, intrusive and stupid. Yet in Marvin, one of their products, whom we might ordinarily be expected to despise as such, much as we are brought to despise the talking lift, the talking door, and the drinks dispenser, and whom the characters themselves often find unbearable, we are presented with a creature who is so pathetic, and yet at the same time so noble, that we can only sympathise with him as a victim of

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his creators. Marvin is, in fact, Frankenstein *«sic»* recast as the clown, monstrous because of his mental, rather than physical, attributes.

This is "flip and shallow" humour? Black, yes. Confusing, yes. "Pseudo"-intellectual? That depends on whether you take it at face value or whether you're prepared to dig a little, to expose your own assumptions and value judgements, and to question them in order to learn something new about your perception of things.

That any speculative fiction reviewer should feel that characters being "impossible to believe in" are grounds for complaint amazes me -- where are the "believable" characters in most of Heinlein's work? In *Dhalgren*? In the *Canopus in Argos* books In *The Sirens of Titan*? In *Lord of the Rings*? Or, more to the point, in *Roderick/Roderick at Random*, or in *The Cyberiad*? Perhaps there are a few, scattered around in this lot. In general though, there is no more ridiculous criticism in the whole of SF.

If he is inclined to analyse, as opposed to merely reacting, the task of the reader under these circumstances is twofold. He must realise that the characters are actually embodiments of a particular set of values, principles and ideas, rather than "real" people, and should then proceed to identify and understand these combinations and their interactions. This may be a variety of intellectual masturbation -- but it seems to produce worthwhile results.

As for verbosity, Jim England is living in a glass-house. His entire review boils down to the following few ill-considered words: "I don't understand how anyone with a brain can find this trash funny." The rest is just pseudo-critical window-dressing and personal invective.

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«At the risk of letting my editorial judgement get confused with my personal feelings, Mark, I think your last sentence describes your own letter admirably. Opinions differ about the worth of Hitch Hiker *(I agree with some of your points, and also with some of Jim's) -- and I think you should accept that some reviewers will dislike it intensely, and will say why. That's their prerogative. Joy Hibbert understands this:»*

CONGRATULATIONS ON FINDING SOMEONE WHO DOESN'T THINK *HHGTTG* is at all funny. I think it's hilarious, personally, but it's nice to see the opposing view, particularly since I didn't think anyone who understood the concepts (as opposed to people who don't read SF and thus found the odd SF image intrusive) held the opposing view.

Had to recover from the shock of Ken Lake's review of *The Forever Man* (that and the shock of finding out in *FI* that he doesn't always read the *Vector* books -- what's he trying to do, drive me into a heart attack?) How can we empathise with a thick hero? Well, possibly the most likeable, empathisable-with character in SF is thick, to put it mildly. To go with your discovery of the one person who doesn't think *Hitch Hiker* is funny, have you also found the one SF reader who is uncaring enough not to empathise with Charly, in "Flowers for Algernon"? There's also a sympathetic thick character in "Born of Man and Woman" but whether he's actually retarded or just kept ignorant is unclear. The retarded female protagonist in "Mother to the World" (I think that's what it's called, it's the one where the only people left after the nukes are a man of reasonable intelligence and a retarded woman, who he has to marry if the species is to survive. No attention is paid to the possibility that her disability is hereditary) -- is much more sympathetic than the man who uses her. And those three are just examples from one collection. *«Which one?»* There's also the possibility that an objectionable thick character is more empathisable-with than an objectionable bright character because s/he doesn't know any better. I can't help wondering, not having read the book, if the woman is "inhuman in virtually every way" because of character defects, or merely because of her intelligence?

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TERRY BROOME'S COMMENT IN *V136* THAT "A SEQUEL SHOULD always attempt to expand on familiar characters" contrasts strangely with Michael Cobley's thesis that trilogies are simply to be lumped in with "rôle-playing, Trekkies, computing, Dr Who, fanzines, fantasy" as examples of 1980s "schisms and segmentation". Terry is talking sense and preaching a gospel; Michael is forcing facts into ludicrous theories -- I wonder why?

Trilogies *do* demand our attention, and in many cases our condemnation. Can I tell you how I find many of them? The first volume, especially when it purports to be an individual novel, sets out a believable and fascinating invented arena with characters interacting within it and a reasonable conclusion arising from that interaction.

The second book fails because (a) the characters are transplanted to a new environment where they act in their now-hackneyed manner, or (b) the old environment is invaded by new characters who are vastly less entertaining and who add nothing to the original interaction. Usually the third book reverses these two -- that is, it picks the development previously unused. This is a great pity.

In theory, a trilogy is a novel which has outgrown the bounds of normal publishing capability within a single cover, and which falls into three separate and internally consistent sections. There is, in other words, a logical scheme of development of plot, environment and characters which carries one along just as the chapters in any single novel should. *Lord of the Rings* is of course the obvious example: there are thousands more, and the format has no more to do with the 1980s and schisms than it had to do with the 1890s and the Victorian craze for serialisation.

A totally different form of trilogy arises when the author really does have no intention of writing more than a single novel, but finds his characters are strong enough to develop their own plotting outside that first scheme into new adventures. Here the word "series" is more apt -- Sherlock Holmes is a perfect example -- but often current publishing practices lead to the author being bullied into creating a three-story "trilogy" for nothing more than marketing purposes, and in such cases we may find him proceeding with a second trilogy, or with spin-offs of one type or another. Where the characters and story-line are adequate this can make for excellent reading and for consumer loyalty -- the trouble comes when the author starts to feel typecast and seeks to break away from his successful format simply because it *is* successful, and here lies of course the danger of disaster.

But the nadir of trilogy writing comes when commercialisation and triteness meet -- where an author with nothing much to say uses a standard formula (the Quest, for example) added to a suspended conclusion, attempting to drag the reader along a well-worn path while denying him/her the emotional release of a proper ending. The style is trite, the content disappointing, and the reaction from the reader is often -- and regrettably, if understandably -- to say "trilogies, you can keep 'em, they're nothing but exploitation".

But "schisms and segmentation" -- what rot!

KEN LAKE
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«Finally, two very helpful responses to Dr Uwe Mageus's plea for information in V136. *First, a copy of Sue Thomason's letter to Dr Mageus:»*

LETTERS

I READ WITH INTEREST YOUR LETTER IN *V136* ASKING FOR INformation about a "ragthorn" tree which you saw whilst on holiday in the Yorkshire Dales. I suspect that the local man who told you the name of the tree has confused botanical information with folklore.

The word "ragthorn" does not appear in the OED, so I suspect it is a dialect word, maybe used locally to describe one particular tree. The custom of worshipping or venerating trees was common throughout ancient northwestern Europe, and there are still several sites in Britain where traces of the old customs remain, though often people do not know their symbolic significance. One very common custom, which still happens at several places in Britain, was to hang scraps or rags of cloth (often torn from the clothing of worshippers) on a "holy" tree. The most common superstition attached to this practice is the belief that leaving a part of one's clothing behind will ensure a safe return to that place. Such votive trees are often described as "fairy trees", and are often associated with a spring or well.

Both hawthorn (*Crataegus monogyna*) and blackthorn (*Prunus spinoza*) are trees which have close associations with fairies in British folklore, and because Pagan holy places were usually taken over for re-use by Christians, rather than being destroyed, there are several places where holy thorn trees are associated with Christian saints (eg Glastonbury, and Madron in Cornwall). Both hawthorn and blackthorn are members of the Rose family (*genus Rosaceae*) which hybridises very easily, and several existing "holy thorn" trees are unusual-looking hybrids or sports (eg the Glastonbury thorn, which flowers very early, in legend on Christmas day). If your "ragthorn" tree was not a sport or hybrid of hawthorn or blackthorn, it may have been a wild plum (*Prunus domestica*, a very variable tree) or cherry plum (*Prunus cerasifera*, usually thornless, but occasionally specimens with thorns are found) or a hybrid of one of these species. Finally, the tree may have been a Common Buckthorn (*Rhamnus cathartica*) which looks quite like a blackthorn, with oval finely toothed leaves and black berries.

I'm sorry that I can't trace your association to a story by Wells. The fact that your local informant crossed himself when mentioning the tree suggests to me that it is (or was) a "holy tree" or "fairy tree", even though the custom of tying rags to the tree may have fallen into dis-use. If you can give me more information about the tree, particularly an exact location (village name?) and a more detailed description of it, I'll try to find out more about it for you.

SUE THOMASON
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FROM DR MAGEUS'S DESCRIPTION, THE TREE SOUNDS VERY LIKE A blackthorn -- even though he said it wasn't. I can think of no other native tree that is crooked, with long thorns and black bark. However, the species is not important in this case; the name *ragthorn* must derive from its function.

I have checked in various books and though I can't find a reference to the name ragthorn, I found *ragbush* in the Chambers Dictionary. It gave the following definition:

Ragbush -- a bush to which shreds of cloth are tied as offerings to the local spirit, especially by a well.

Much more information about these customs is to be found in Sir John Rhys's book *Celtic Folklore, Welsh and Manx* (first published in 1901). Generally the wells were thought to have healing properties and the tying of rags to a tree growing near the sacred well was part of a ritual performed by someone seeking a cure. Rhys says that the tree usually found by a sacred well was some kind of thorn. Thus I think it is safe to say that the Yorkshire ragthorn is the same as a ragbush -- especially bearing in mind that plant and tree names have many local variants. Rhys also states that he has heard of rag wells existing in Lincolnshire, so it seems to have been a widespread custom which was practiced on the eastern side of the British Isles as well as on the western.

Details of the ritual carried out at the well vary slightly from place to place. In one example the sick person took a mouthful of water from the well and, keeping it in the mouth, walked twice round the well, finally spitting the water into a rag which was then tied to the thorn tree. In other places, a person with a wound would wash the cut with a rag wetted with water from the well, and then bind up the wound with a fresh rag, tying the old rag to the thorn. As the cloth left tied to the tree rotted, the sickness faded or the wound healed -- or so it was believed.

These wells were originally sacred to the old gods, so no doubt devout Christians would cross themselves when referring to them. When Sir John Rhys was writing, he believed these rag offerings were still being made in the more remote parts of Britain. Even 90 years later, the superstitions would linger and a man might well still cross himself when a ragthorn was seen or referred to.

Finally, I just want to say that I much enjoyed the article by Garry Kilworth and I agree with his theory put forward in the Coda that the development of story ideas is a learned process. Good writers usually get better as they get older. Practice must be perfecting something -- and it's not just writing style.

MARGARET HALL
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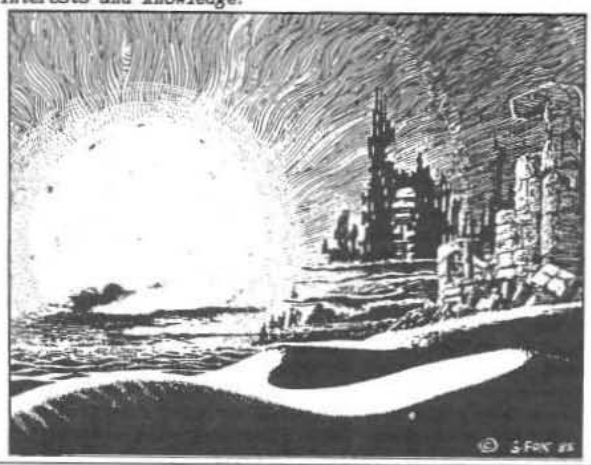
«Margaret couldn't find a reference in Wells or Verne either. If anyone can, please let me know -- and Dr Mageus, as well. Between preparation and publication of V136 *I read Janet & Colin Bord's* Earth Rites: fertility practices in pre-industrial Britain *(Granada/Paladin 1982). It's somewhat better than their previous works, though still a cobbling together of older authorities rather than in any way a piece of original research. However, it does include a chapter on holy wells and sacred trees, in which they discuss the fertility powers of holy springs and wells, the healing power that Margaret describes, and also the idea of "an appreciation of the tree as a symbol of renewal. If a well dried up, its 'spirit' could be moved to a nearby sac-red tree." The Bords acknowledge their debt to earlier writers with a very extensive source-bibliography, which includes Vaughn Cornish's* Historic Thorn Trees in the British Isles *(Country Life, 1941), which might contain further information.*

I've gone into so much detail partly because of the possible SF connection, but mainly because this sort of delving for detail is something many SF fans are good at, and I believe part of the function of the BSFA should be to pass on the benefits of our specialist abilities, interests and knowledge.



ALBION WRIT

THE IMPERFECT ECHO

An Interview with Guy Gavriel Kay
by Paul Kincaid

Guy Gavriel Kay's involvement with high fantasy goes back to the master of them all, J.R.R.Tolkien, for Kay assisted in the work on *The Silmarillion* with Christopher Tolkien. His own fantasy trilogy, *The Fionnavar Tapestry*, has wonhim considerable praise in his own right, and the second volume, *The Wandering Fire* was published in Britain by Unwin during 1986. It was reviewed in *Vector 136*.

PAUL KINCAID *The Summer Tree* was your first novel?

GUY GAVRIEL KAY *The Summer Tree* was my first published novel. I'd written a book about six years before that. The first time I went to Greece, in fact, to write was in the winter of '78/'79, and I wrote a book called *The Grand Tour* that was about North Americans back-packing through Europe, and it was very well received by publishers who saw it. A lot of positive encouraging notice, but nobody thought they could make any money out of it, so everybody said: "This guy is worth keeping an eye on, but send us his fantasy when he writes his fantasy." And that, basically, is what happened.

PAUL KINCAID What made you interested in writing fantasy?

GUY GAVRIEL KAY I'd always been interested in it. Mythology, folklore, and fantasy as a derivation of that, were extreme childhood interests. The specific connection to the genre, as you probably know, came in 1974/75 when I was hired by the estate of J.R.R.Tolkien to assist Christopher Tolkien in the editorial construction of *The Silmarillion*. And that was a very deep re-immersion in the genre.

PAUL KINCAID How did that come about?

GUY GAVRIEL KAY Christopher Tolkien's second wife is from Winnipeg where I grew up. Our families knew each other, and I met him a number of times in the two years or so before his father passed away. When he needed assistance in the editing of *The Silmarillion*, for a number of reasons it made sense to him to have a younger associate rather than another fully-fledged academic of his own standing. I think for reasons of balancing the editing team as much as anything else. And I was able to provide an external viewpoint in addition to that. So he invited me in the summer of '74 to come to Oxford and work with him on the book. I got there in October and we were editing *The Silmarillion* until the summer of the following year.

PAUL KINCAID What was it like working with Christopher Tolkien?

GUY GAVRIEL KAY The editing year itself was an extraordinary one. The process of doing the book was both exhilarating and at times terrifying in terms of the scope of the project, the size and numbers of the papers that were the Tolkien canon if you will. And the process of editing it went remarkably amiably, very smoothly, I think as much as anything else because we were both so intensely involved.

PAUL KINCAID Let's go back to *The Summer Tree*. Why is it that so much fantasy takes the form of trilogies?

GUY GAVRIEL KAY A good question. It's beginning to disturb be a little bit too. I've sworn a few oaths not to write any more trilogies. I've also sworn an oath, in passing, not to make the Fionnavar Tapestry a four volume trilogy. There seem to be more and more of those happening as well, where the writer goes back to the well one more time.

I think, to answer the direct question, it's as much a question of momentum and habit now as anything else. I think that once a genre has a predisposition towards a certain form, that form becomes more and more entrenched. Fantasy and science fiction seem to carry with them a strong notion that a multi-volume work is appropriate, in most other genres it's regarded as inappropriate. Once you've got that propensity or predisposition, readers who become writers have read a great number of multi-volume works, their mind when structuring their own volume tends to fall naturally into the form that seems to predominate in the genre. So it's a self-perpetuating thing.

The other, more technical aspect of it, I think, is that if you're doing a process of world-building, and you're doing it seriously, you're going to take some real pains in constructing the world where your novel takes place. It seems a dreadful shame, bordering on tragic, if you've spent a lot of time constructing a world, to abandon it after 250-odd pages, and go through the whole process again. I know in my own case I spent 18 months constructing and building the world of Fionnavar, in as many dimensions as I was capable of conceptualising, as part of the pre-writing period, before I sat down and wrote the prologue.

PAUL KINCAID What exactly did you do in that pre-writing period?

GUY GAVRIEL KAY Two things really, two simultaneous processes. One is extensive note-taking towards the plot and the characterisation; and the other is equally extensive note-taking in terms of structuring the geography, the map, the history that underlies the story of the tapestry. A great deal of care - because it's a pet fetish of mine, almost - a great deal of care in structuring the magic, and figuring out what exactly the rules of magic were going to be in Fionnavar. I have a frustration with a lot of books where I have a feeling that the use of magic is erratic or simply to fit the dictates of the plot at any given moment. I wanted the whole structure of magic to make sense and to have it very clear in my own mind before I began writing the book that would make use of it.

ALBION WRIT

PAUL KINCAID How did the idea first develop?

GUY GAVRIEL KAY It's a good question. I knew that I wanted to do a book on the largest scale that I could handle, that would be an attempt to marry or merge the wonderful story-telling potential that I've always felt exists in high fantasy, growing out of our childhood passion for folk tales and legends and so forth, that quality of fantasy that's perfectly adapted for story-telling. I wanted to try and merge that with something that I felt an absence of in many fantasies that I've read, which was the attention to characterisation, plausibility of motivation, that exists in the contemporary fiction that we tend to be most drawn to. And my underlying, if you will, head purpose was to see if it was possible to do a book that was very much high fantasy while at the same time hanging on to the plausibility and characterisation that I liked in contemporary fiction.

The specific story is a little bit harder. It came in vignettes years and years ago, long before I started writing it; I was given flash images, if you will, of certain scenes that later ended up being part of the book. And when I sat down six years ago to begin structuring the novel that would contain these scenes and this underlying purpose, the plot gradually took shape.

PAUL KINCAID You've talked about the predisposition to write fantasies in trilogies, were you from the start plotting such and such will happen in the first volume, such and such in the second, and it will come together in this way in the third?

GUY GAVRIEL KAY Well, not quite. Certainly from the start I knew it was a very big book. It wasn't formally a trilogy from the very beginning. One of the other reasons there are so many trilogies is that there aren't that many 1100-page novels being published. And if you're doing a very big story then there's going to be a publisher's predisposition towards bringing it out in sequence in any case. I don't like fake trilogies, I don't like the ones that are three volumes of 180 pages each or something like that, I find that might be a bit manipulative. But three volumes that come out at 12 or 1100 pages I think is a legitimate exercise in multi-volume work.

Once I'd started writing the story, began to get a sense of the length, I started to pay fairly close attention to where the breaks should fall. And I've been accused by readers with varying degrees of frustration who picked up *The Summer Tree* before *The Wandering Fire* came out, of leaving them on a cliff.

I think once someone begins *The Wandering Fire*, they will see almost immediately why *The Summer Tree* had to end where it did. *The Summer Tree* occupies a span of days, no more than that. It's a week and a half of very close plotting, very rapidly moving developments in a short span of time. *The Wandering Fire* picks up seven months later. It's a major leap in time, and when you make that sort of leap in a book that's been working on a matter of hours and days, it really does seem natural that they take a beat before moving on. The end of *The Wandering Fire* has, I think, the same sort of obvious conclusion to it before moving on to *The Darkest Road*, which is the third book.

PAUL KINCAID Did you have the entire Tapestry complete before the first appeared?

GUY GAVRIEL KAY No. I subscribe to what I call the Graham Greene school of fiction, because he's put it most succinctly. Greene is on record as saying that he doesn't like to know exactly what is going to happen at the end of his books because he gets bored writing them. He becomes a stenographer, as I think he's put it, he's simply writing down what he's already worked out. I had the broad outline, certainly, I think if you simply leap into the ocean you're going to sink. I did have the broad outline, the sections

100, 200, maybe even 300 pages ahead of me were quite clearly structured, but I didn't have the exact details of the last volume worked out until I began that volume and the movement of the plot was making itself clear to me where it had to go.

This is by no means a comment on writers who work the other way. Writing is difficult enough that whatever works for you, you do it. Balzac, I think, kept rotting onions in his drawer and whenever he felt inspiration flagging he opened the drawer. I think it was Pavlovian: if you don't get moving you're going to have to smell rotting onions, so you'd better write.

From my point of view I found it very energizing, very stimulative to the creative process. to sit down in the morning and say, okay, you have to figure out where this must move, you have to discover it. So I was constantly engaged in creating the book, rather than one orgy of creativity before I started writing, and then three years of simply transcribing that initial impulse.

PAUL KINCAID There's a strong undercurrent of myth in the book.

GUY GAVRIEL KAY You're quite right, there is a strong and very deliberate undercurrent. It's a fascination of mine, comparative mythology is something in which I read very deeply both specifically in preparing the background to the trilogy, and just out of general interest for most of my adult life. I wanted to play and work with the trappings of mythology in the tapestry, to turn some of them upside down, to echo others. The notion of the tapestry itself, as you know, is that Fionnavar is the first world, the perfect world, which all others, including our own, imperfectly mirror. One of the ways I thought would be most interesting to lay in that concept, without hammering the reader over the head with what I was doing which I don't like, was to echo, slightly distort, half-references to mythologies which we know in this world. Slightly changed, so that the reader is constantly saying, I hope, "you know, I know that little bit," or "that reminds me of something". So that, for example, on a very mundane level, the sword in the stone of Arthurian legend becomes the king's spear in Fionnavar. Just a tiny, minor change that, I hope, will serve, as they accumulate, to give readers the sense I want that this is where they began, and we've got it filtered down, if you will, from worlds and centuries into our world, and we've got the basic story, but we haven't got it exactly right. So the ravens in *The Summer Tree* are very closely analagous to the ravens in Yggdrasil, the world tree in Norse mythology; and the ravens that Paul sees and hears are closely parallel to the ravens of Odin in the Norse myths. The shamanistic rituals of the Dalrei very closely parallel the rituals of the plains Indians, and the shamanistic traditions of the steppes of Russia.

PAUL KINCAID Do you think the mythological element has extended to the structure, the shape of the book?

GUY GAVRIEL KAY That's an interesting question. What did extend to the shape of it was the Tapestry idea, which of course underlies the mythology, because God as the weaver in Fionavar was one of the happiest ideas: so many things reverberate, flow from it. The structure of the tapestry was very natural in the way that the writing flowed after that. The story moves forward to a certain point, and then shuttles back a bit, then moves forward again, and then shuttles back a bit. It was a very deliberate attempt in places to come up with a rhythm for the narrative that would echo that kind of movement of a loom.

PAUL KINCAID Since you have worked on *The Silmarillion*, how do you consider the way that every fantasy novel that comes along is compared to Tolkien, as if Tolkien has set the shape and the structure of fantasy novels for all time? Do you think that's so?

GUY GAVRIEL KAY It's one of the root questions, it's one of the central questions of our day in fantasy. He casts a giant shadow. He didn't create the genre, but you put it very well, he set the shape of it, even to the trilogy question. The whole tradition springs from the accident of the paper shortage at the time *The Lord of the Rings* came out. It came out in three volumes by accident, and that set a pattern. A lot of accidents have set a lot of patterns in history.

But the answer to the question, I think, is that there's an inevitability to the comparison. There's very few fields of fiction where one writer so set his stamp on that kind of fiction for that time, so all of us working in the immediate post-Tolkien period must sustain comparison and analogy. In my own case, obviously, because of my close association with the Tolkien works themselves, it's also appropriate that critics make a comparison, and I can't quarrel when they make that comparison. What I like to think is that, majestic as *The Lord of the Rings* itself was, and it was, there is a great deal of room for manoeuvring within the structures and parameters of high fantasy. Some writers have said he did it all, there's no way I could carve out for myself a space anywhere near the top of that mountain, I'm going to do something completely different, I'm going to write an entirely different kind of fantasy, or an entirely different kind of science fiction, I am simply not going to compete. Because they may look at it as a competition. I don't see it that way. I see it as a repository of material in the myths and folk tales that Tolkien was fascinated by himself. And that repository can be worked with so many different ways that I really do think that there's lots and lots of room for writers to work with those primal myths, as much as Tolkien himself did, and come to a different destination.

PAUL KINCAID Talking of primal myths, Umberto Eco sees the middle ages having established all contemporary woes, parliaments, banking systems. And he regards heroic fantasy as a harking back to the beginning of the woes, whereas fantasy writers seem to use it as a harking back to an age of innocence. Which do you?

GUY GAVRIEL KAY That's the sort of question that you don't want to answer glibly because it's a perceptive observation. One thing that occurs to me is that the middle ages, the medieval societal structure, for those with some status, some room for manoeuvre, represents a period of time when the individual could make a difference. When individual actions and input could have quite powerful profound effects reverberating through either a small society or a large one. There's a sense, increasingly, in contemporary society that that isn't the case. That it is becoming more and more difficult for the individual to directly, by your own intelligence or courage or recititude or probity, make a significant difference on the world that impacts upon you. It's something that's slipping away from us. So that's one of the attractions - maybe in general, certainly for me - of writing in this sort of context.

But the middle ages weren't a very innocent time, in literal terms. We have a contemporary mythologising of them. That line about T.H.White's *Once and Future King*: "The middle ages as they never were but should have been", which is a wonderful, wonderful description. I think that sums up that view of the middle ages as a time of innocence. But as you know I'm also interested in the complexities of power politics in that sort of context. In fact *The Summer Tree* begins, and that element is sustained in the other two books, with internal religious squabbling between the followers of the goddess and the god, and that underlies much of the work. There was a tremendously complex societal structure in the middle ages that tends to be glossed over if we think of them merely as bucolic times of innocence.

PAUL KINCAID Yes, so many fantasies seem to be exercises in innocence in that respect. Do you get frustrated that the market seems to be drowned out by them, rather than books that try to do something deeper, stronger?

GUY GAVRIEL KAY I don't suppose there's much point getting irritated. Most - how shall I put this? - most of what's written in most genres is not top quality. Most lawyers are not top quality, most physicians are not top quality. The majority of what comes down in anything is not going to be straining or striving for excellence. I don't think there's much point in wasting a great deal of energy being irritated.

PAUL KINCAID In other areas the works or quality are the ones that are recognised, whereas all too often in fantasy the perceived image of fantasy is the majority.

GUY GAVRIEL KAY If there's a frustration it's that the

genre, to my mind, is unduly defensive about the stuff that's churned out. It's churned out, there's a lot of it, but in the same way the preponderance of mainstream fiction is stuff that's churned out. But you don't hear people saying of Salman Rushdie or Saul Bellow that they're not very good because they write in the same genre that Jackie Collins writes in. It would never occur to anyone to diminish or downgrade the excellence of the quality writers of mainstream fiction by saying that they write in the same field as trashy writers. On the other hand in genre fiction critics and to a certain extent we ourselves working within it and reading within it, get overly defensive, I believe, about trying to separate out our quality people from the trash and apologising for them. I think one of the signs of the coming of age of our genre will be when we say "yes, of course there's a lot of rubbish being written. There's a lot of rubbish being written in every way. But look at this, this is good." And we won't be defensive about the people writing rubbish, we'll simply say that any successful, thriving form of endeavour will attract people with a wide level of competence and aspiration, and we'll accept it as a fact of life.

PAUL KINCAID How do you feel now that the trilogy is over?

GUY GAVRIEL KAY A very strange feeling, Paul. It's exhilaration, relief, and a tremendous sense of dislocation in some ways. It was a very intense six year effort. I was extremely deeply immersed in the construction of the story. It's a very emotional story, the last volume took a lot out of me in the attempt to bring the climax up to the level I hoped I could sustain. It's only recently all finished and I'm starting to gear myself up towards the next project, and I'm finding that right now I'm in a probably fairly predictable transitory state where I haven't quite pulled myself out from what I had been doing to get moving into the next project. So there's a great feeling of relief. There's a certain satisfaction because I'm very happy with the last volume, I'm very happy with the way the thing comes together. And there's an anticipation and hope that when it finally does come out the readership response will vindicate that feeling. And it's coupled with an awareness that I have to put it behind me and move onto the next project.

PAUL KINCAID After something like the trilogy, where do you go next?

GUY GAVRIEL KAY I don't do the same thing. Whatever I do I don't want to be redundant. It's certainly going to involve fantasy elements to a very strong degree indeed. The novel that's incubating slowly in my mind is another attempt to synthesise or harmonise elements that I admire in both fantasy and contemporary literature. I think if I end up looking for a niche it will be as someone trying to bridge what we often see as a huge gap between the fantasy genre and the mainstream. I'd like to try to eliminate or diminish the size of that gap.

THE VOYAGE OF THE SPACE BEAGLE

Andy Sawyer

AE Van Vogt is not one of my favourite SF writers. But his novel *The Voyage of the Space Beagle* (1950) exemplifies all that is, to me, best about him, and I would like to take a look at what makes the book, despite its crudities, a classic of SF.

I can best explain its highlights by comparing the novel with Van Vogt's first published SF story, "Black Destroyer" (1939), which is essentially a "first draft" for *Space Beagle*. The practice of fleshing out a short story or novella into novel length is one of the banes of SF; however, a look at both novel and short story offers useful insights into how the original concept has changed, both in plotting and characterisation and the language with which they are built up, to transform a powerful but basically ordinary story into a symmetrical and thematically coherent novel. It is my opinion that here we have an almost naked example of how the initial ideas of a writer change and develop after a story is written, and how the concerns of science fiction itself developed over the course of a decade.

"Black Destroyer" became the first quarter of *Space Beagle*. An expedition to a distant world discovers Coeurl, a huge, intelligent cat-like creature with super-biological powers, who discovers in the humans a food supply far surpassing anything on his barren planet and attempts to take over their ship. In his introduction to the story reprinted in *First Voyages* (Avon, 1982, ed. Knight/Greenberg/Olander), Van Vogt tells us something of his writing methods and preoccupations; his construction of the story in 800-word "scenes", the fact that "the story itself, as with most of my stories, came to me in a dream" and that "each word was chosen for the sound of the letters in it." Mood and action were essentials in telling his story. But this is typical Van Vogt: I don't intend to go very much deeper into his personal theories and practice of writing -- the entry in the Nicholls' *Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* and the items it cites will do that better than I can. What is important for my argument is that when he came to turn "Black Destroyer" (and three other stories) into *Space Beagle*, he revised heavily. First, let's look at the actual writing; as examples, just take the first two paragraphs:

> On and on Coeurl prowled! The black, moonless, almost starless night yielded reluctantly before a grim reddish dawn that crept up from his left. A vague, dull light it was, that gave no sense of approaching warmth, no comfort, nothing but a cold, diffuse lightness, slowly revealing a nightmare landscape.
>
> Black, jagged rock, and bleak, unliving plain took form around him, as a pale red sun peered at last above the grotesque horizon. It was then Coeurl recognised suddenly that he was on familiar ground.
>
> ("Black Destroyer")

> On and on Coeurl prowled. The black, moonless, almost starless night yielded reluctantly before a grim reddish dawn that crept up from his left. It was a vague light that gave no sense of approaching warmth. It slowly revealed a nightmare landscape.
>
> Jagged black rock and a black, lifeless plain took form around him. A pale red sun peered above the grotesque horizon. Fingers of light probed among the shadows. And still there was no sign of the family of id creatures that he had been trailing now for nearly a hundred days.
>
> (*Space Beagle*)

Even these introductory sentences bear evidence of extensive revision. The first sentence merely has the exclamation mark removed -- but how much less strident it then becomes. Sentence two is the same in both versions; but the third sentence in "Black Destroyer" has the inversion removed and is cut short, while out of it is constructed the fourth sentence of *Space Beagle*. ("It was slowly revealed.....") The prose has become a lighter shade of purple: tauter, simpler, more effective.

In paragraph two, the first sentence is also cut to make two shorter, tighter sentences. The sentence beginning "Fingers of light....." gives more atmosphere and a sense of progressing in time, continuing the build-up to the final sentence which, in both versions, brings us to a mini-climax: of disappointment in the novel, of recognition in the story.

Both introductions are actually skilful acts of scene-setting, although the novel-version seems to me to bear the marks of a better, more experienced writer. What is noteworthy is the way the bones of the narrative have remained, yet how Van Vogt has already brought us to a slightly different position in less than a hundred words.

Already we have a slight but possibly significant change in the story, and by returning our focus to the events narrated, rather than the words used, we can see at once that Van Vogt has substantially changed the tale he originally gave us.

The structure of "Black Destroyer" is standard SF-melodrama: a superhuman peril is encountered and overcome. Apart from a treatise on cyclic history, which becomes relevant at the *denouement*, we are given little beyond this pattern. The spaceship is unnamed, the relationships between the crew members lightly sketched if touched at all, and little happens apart from the basic conflict between the men and Coeurl.

As soon as Van Vogt gives a name to the ship -- *Space Beagle* -- we have a new dimension: not only do we have the romance of Darwin's original voyage of discovery on the *Beagle*, we are reminded of the theory of evolution, and it is this which leads us into the novel to follow the *Space Beagle* along a path which seems guided by that very concept.

Both the alien perils which the *Space Beagle* encounters -- cumulatively greater -- and the conflict which is faced by the Nexialist Grosvenor as he struggles to establish his "super science" as the basis for a kind of evolutionary quantum jump to transcend the cyclic growth and decay of civilisation have Darwinism at their root. By adding as a sub-plot the rivalry between Kent, head of the Department of Chemistry (who from a cardboard but fairly positive character in "Black Destroyer" becomes a political opportunist characteristic of a civilisation about to collapse), and Grosvenor (who does not appear in the story-version), Van Vogt increases by several orders of magnitude the tension in his tale.

A standard fix-up, you may think -- but sub-plot, for a start, is perhaps the wrong expression for what is actually happening here: to the standard pattern of men-meet-alien/alien-threatens-men/men-defeat-alien, Van Vogt adds a more dramatic component -- men-quarrel-among-themselves. In *Space Beagle* he has successfully subsumed that pattern in two larger ones.

The Spenglerian theory of historical cycles introduced in a fairly undigested form into "Black Destroyer" is refined in *Space Beagle* to become part of the novel's structure. Each alien menace -- Coeurl; the telepathic bird-people; the Riim; Itxl, survivor of a universe from before the Big Bang; the galaxy-wide dust intelligence, the Anabis -- is partly analysed through the theory of cyclic history as expressed by the archaeologist Korita. We realise, however, that more important than the aliens' position on the cyclic curve is Man's. "Right now, we are making the mistakes that lead to decay," says Grosvenor. It is Kent's political ambition to become Director of the Expedition, and Grosvenor's struggle to get Nexialism accepted and break out of the cyclic pattern, that structure the novel.

Hence the way in which the initial actions of "Black Destroyer" are given further meaning in *Space Beagle*. For example:

> Commander Hal Morton heard little Gregory Kent, the chemist, laugh with the embarrassed half gurgle with which he invariably announced inner uncertainty..... "I'll take no chances with anything as big as that."
>
> Commander Morton allowed his own deep chuckle to echo along the communicators. "That," he grunted finally, "is one of the reasons why you're on this expedition, Kent -- because you never leave anything to chance."
>
> ("Black Destroyer")

> The communicator in the headpiece of his space suit came abruptly to life. A man laughed softly, and then said, "Personally, I'm taking no chances with anything as large as that."
>
> As the other spoke, Grosvenor recognised the voice of Gregory Kent, head of the chemistry department. A small man physically, Kent had a big personality. He had numerous friends and supporters aboard the ship, and had already announced his candidacy for the directorship of the expedition in the forthcoming election.....
>
> Another voice sounded. The tone was deeper and more relaxed. Grosvenor recognised it as belonging to Hal Morton, Director of the Expedition. Morton said, "That's one of the reasons why you're on this trip, Kent -- because you leave very little to chance."
>
> It was a friendly comment. It ignored the fact that Kent had already set himself up as Morton's opponent for the directorship. Of course, it could have been designed as a bit of incidental political virtuosity to put over to the more naive listeners the notion that Morton felt no ill will towards his rival.
>
> (*Space Beagle*)

The same event -- the approach of Coeurl to the group of scientists -- is used in *Space Beagle* to illuminate a whole new set of plot structures. Again, a scene is rewritten, this time extensively, and it becomes not just an event in itself, but a clue to forthcoming events and wider implications. Essentially the same words are spoken, the same actions performed, but the novel dwells on them and lets us see them more clearly as possessing undertones which are not present in the story and instead of a more or less unimportant exchange of words, the passage, as perceived by Grosvenor (note the change in viewpoint from Morton to Grosvenor) becomes a key passage in establishing the basis for the future conflict.

Compared to *Space Beagle*, "Black Destroyer" is altogether cruder; a straightforward adventure tale with a dash of cultural speculation. *Space Beagle*, whatever its faults (and I'll go into these shortly) is a carefully crafted novel. It is patterned in several different ways. There is the obvious, strictly linear journey further into space: the novel ends with the *Space Beagle* having to lead the Anabis out into intergalactic space to starve it rather than risk it following them to the Home Galaxy. There is the episodic, cumulative pattern of encountering each time a more powerful alien threat. There is the cyclic pattern in the historical/cultural discussions and the escalating conflict between Grosvenor and Kent. It is not necessary to *believe* in Spengler's theory of historical cycles nor Van Vogt's "Nexialism" (which, like most of his superscientific panaceas, remains largely undescribed but seems to be a mixture of up-to-date teaching methods and Dianetics) to enjoy the book, but they are good struts to hang the story on and give *Space Beagle* the shape of a novel rather than a collection of linked stories.

In conclusion, *Space Beagle* seems to me to be one of Van Vogt's best novels. Despite its origin as a fix-up of related short stories, it has a novel's geometry and depth. Its language is, at times, powerful: Van Vogt knows all the tricks of pulp fiction. Its range is limited, but not superficial.

That is not to say I do not find questionable, even sinister, themes in it. Grosvenor knows everything, it seems because Nexialism is Super; fine, it might be, but I still remain suspicious of panacea philosophies, and here Van Vogt is clearly stacking the deck in advance of the game.

And among the weaknesses of the pulp fiction which Van Vogt does so well is its inability to come to terms with the fact that there is more than one sex. Thus the *Space Beagle*, we read, is "an all-masculine expedition (where) the problem of sex had been chemically solved by the inclusion of specific drugs in the general diet" (only too neatly sidestepping several further possible areas of patterned conflict: no wonder the poor souls spend so much time in political intrigue!), which is on one occasion even faced with "an enemy who had curiously womanlike bodies and faces."

Still, at least we have a novel where the winner succeeds by brain rather than by brawn, even if his position stage centre as Messiah of a new "science" gives him something of an unfair advantage over his opponents, and I find a satisfying pattern and logic in *The Voyage of the Space Beagle* (even if I must ultimately reject it on philosophical and ethical grounds) because it shows evidence that a space adventure can actually be about several things at the same time and that it is possible to organise such a novel with that organic symmetry which is the mark of an effective work of art.

I do not wish to make inflated claims for *Space Beagle* as a book or Van Vogt as a writer, but a careful reading of the book will show a level of care and ingenuity which surely repays study by anyone who is interested in what science fiction is all about.

—*—

THE GHOST IN THE PEN

Michael Cobley

Part II - Fantasy

A View of Politics and Philosophy in Science Fiction and Fantasy

> "But I have so little of any of these things! You are wise and powerful. Will you not take the Ring?"
> "No!" cried Gandalf, springing to his feet. "With that power I should have power too great and terrible. And over me the Ring would gain a power still greater and more deadly." His eyes flashed and his face was lit as by a fire within. "Do not tempt me! For I do not wish to become like the Dark Lord himself. Yet the way of the Ring to my heart is by pity, pity for weakness and the desire of strength to do good. Do not tempt me! I dare not take it, not even to keep it safe, unused. The wish to wield it would be too great for my strength. I shall have such need of it. Great perils lie before me."

Gandalf knew that the One Ring represented an absolute power that could absolutely corrupt him. Sauron, in creating the One Ring, also created a sub-reality totally permeated by his own obsessive and corrupted influence, and inhabited only by himself and the Wraiths. Others could enter and pass through it by way of the powers of the three Elven rings, or through the usage of magic like the Istari (Gandalf, Saruman, Radagast *et al*), but they could not become part of it unless they unequivocably accepted the Ring and all it stood for, or were captured and subverted -- like the Wraiths.

Central to the Fantasy genre is the concept that the running of the universe -- and by extension, mortal lives - is the responsibility of powers greater than ordinary mortal human beings: in *Lord of the Rings* it is Iluvatar, the One. Unfortunately, being a truly seminal work, *Lord of the Rings* has had a paralysing effect on fantasy and fantastic literature, such that Iluvatar, Sauron and Gandalf have been cloned in their manifestations that appear in the pastiches currently flooding the paperback market.

Yet Fantasy did not begin with Tolkien's work. Its roots sink deep into the international myths and legends that have had an undeniable influence on what might be termed Modern Fantasy. Discernible as a mode of literature at the turn of the century, it has had its learned exponents like William Morris and CS Lewis, its portrayers of eloquent intricacy like Clark Ashton Smith and Lord Dunsany, the singular HP Lovecraft, and the swashbucklers Robert E Howard and Edgar Rice Burroughs.

The Worm Ouroboros by ER Eddison saw the light of day in 1922, *The Hobbit* by Tolkien in 1937 and *The Sword In The Stone* by TH White in 1939 -- but it wasn't until the 60's when the youth cultures rejected established solutions to seek out their own, that fantasy really took off.

The success of *Dune* by Frank Herbert was quite significant -- it was swaggering space opera, it was the saga of battling families, it was the spice drug, it was mystery and mysticism, and all enacted across the almost tangible sands of Arrakis. Frank Herbert's observations on power were interesting -- Paul Atreides discovers how the spice can be destroyed and holds this over the heads of the Guild Navigators for whom the precognitive qualities of the spice are essential in the operation of their starships. Because he can destroy the spice, Paul has complete control of it, and thus wields immense power over the Harkonnens and the Padishah Emperor who is forced to abdicate in favour of Paul. Authority lies with the controller of the spice.

This vision of the young hero tapping sources of hidden and unlimited power to overthrow the corrupt (and usually older) representatives of authority can be seen as a reflection of wish fulfilment. In a psychedelic era, pundits and mentors were selling "guide-books" to the cosmos, eastern religions had come west in a plethora of yogis, swamis and gurus, and all of them promised states, keys, paths and selves in a confusing scramble for the Ultimate.

The thing was, no-one ever explained what the consequences of attaining the Ultimate or the hidden Power might be. The *denouments* of fantasies set in semi-medieval or pre-industrial societies usually depict the victorious Prince, now a safely married King, toting his magical sword Hordewaster and his holy hammer Minioncrusher as he goes swanning around his newly acquired kingdom on a publicity tour. The problem with monarchic power is that no-one can guarantee the benevolence of the new King's descendants, no matter how saintly he is. (Mind you, it's always good for a sequel or four!)

This is not to say that all fantasy sees the Ultimate power as benevolent and unassailable. In Michael Moorcock's *Eternal Champion* cycle the gods of Law and Chaos only seem to be all-powerful -- in reality their very existence is dependent on the faith of the humans with whom they play brutal and vicious games. Even their characters seem locked, as if they could not be other than what they are. But they are vulnerable to the Eternal Champion in all his flawed and despairing guises: even the Cosmic Balance -- the ultimate Logos of the Champion's worlds -- is wrecked by Erekose in a final act of despair. With Corum and the Hand of Kwll and the Eye of Rhynn, Jerry Cornelius and the Shifter, and Elric and Stormbringer, Michael Moorcock made it clear that a source of power could not fail to affect its possessor.

The Logos in Roger Zelazny's Amber is the Pattern of Amber, a weaving motif laid out on a cellar floor beneath the royal palace in the city of Amber. The Pattern's power supports Amber and casts shadows of the city outwards, shadows that with distance become progressively less like Amber and more prone to manipulation by the Courts of Chaos, the strange dark counterpoint to Amber. Oberon, who built Amber, was a renegade Lord of the Courts. After his disappearance, intrigues to secure his throne ensue among the various factions of his somewhat extended family, a group of individuals whose Machiavellian aptitudes and sheer devious double-dealing would put JR Ewing to shame.

The five volume story reveals layer after layer as cabal after cabal comes to light and plots are laid bare. Corwin, son of Oberon and the story's narrator, finds power slipping away as he seems to draw nearer to it. First it is the throne, then the Jewel of Judgement which confers weather control on the wearer. Later he discovers another Pattern, the original, of which the one below Amber is itself a shadow. He then meets one of his father's servants who is also a renegade from the Courts -- and it is he who *is* the Pattern, and the Jewel of Judgement the tool by which it was created.

So the Logos of Amber stems from the person who created it and towards the story's end, in a bid to defeat the desolation unleashed by his enemy, Corwin shapes a new pattern out of the sights, smells, sounds and memories of Earth, itself a shadow of Amber.

The "hidden-hero-claiming-his/her (almost invariably 'his')-destiny" has very quickly become a cliché, along with the concomitant menagerie of elves, dwarves, dragons and wizards set in their antiseptic medievalism. It is no coincidence that fantasy has increased in popularity in recent years while "rational" science fiction has suffered a corresponding slump. With the distrust of technology that grew out of the years of Dread there has been an increase in demand for the novel of anti-science fiction, especially series novels pandering to adolescent power fantasies.

This view may seem harsh but the evidence tends to support it. This is an age where the political parties of the Right have set liberal education and civil rights back by over ten years, where illiteracy and ignorance are running at catastrophically high levels, where the Moral Majority -- with the at least tacit approval of the

American administration -- has been revamping them ol' brainwashing techniques from the Bible Belt for this age of Tele-Vitiation, and where our Prime Minister has accumulated so much power during her term of office that, for just one example, she single-handedly resisted every call and plea for sanctions against South Africa in the face of national opinion and the unanimity of Commonwealth support for sanctions.

Because this is an age of Schisms, opposition to the Authoritarians has taken a long time to achieve any coherency, certainly in this country -- in the States it may already be too late. But here in the UK, as in the US, people are pursuing lifestyles of survival, of doing their own things without bucking those in Authority. In SF this has taken shape in fantasy and science fiction novels jam-packed with primitive political and social concepts, moribund imagery and relentless formula plots.

A prime example of this is the "hero/ine-who-is-brought-from-Earth-to-another-'magical'-earth" plot. You know the books of which I speak -- the Darwath trilogy, the Spellsinger books, the River of Dancing Gods trilogy, and the Covenant books for instance -- yet in taste and inventiveness they are several light years ahead of the Gor books, the Calibans of our tempestuous fictions. But compared to what has been produced by the likes of John Brunner, Thomas Disch, Brian Aldiss, Harlan Ellison and Robert Silverberg, these novels are distinctly reminiscent of soufflés -- notable more for their volume than their content.

I am not a hater of fantasy. It is bad and cynical writing that I detest, regardless of the form it takes. The truth of the matter is that our beloved genre is being sliced up, to the extent that cross-fertilisation between the sociologists, the technophiles and the good old adventurists is at a perilously low ebb, and another fact is that the last of those three groups is by far the most powerful, in terms of numbers and spending potential.

And what now? Well, as soon as William Gibson's *Neuromancer* began to pick up momentum (and awards) some pundit with more verbal ingenuity than understanding was swift to hang the sub-genre tag of "Cyberpunk" on the book's style. For all that, at the same time *Neuromancer* is both something fresh and also (in its narrative atmosphere) redolent of our times -- cults, fashions, styles, youth gangs and despairing attempts to survive in the shadows of corporate gargantua that have grown too powerful to be seriously challenged.

Although *Neuromancer* and *Count Zero* seem more concerned with the delineation of an atmosphere of deep hopelessness than an attempt to suggest solutions, this is no bad thing -- one writer's imagined vision of where we might be going may help to warn us all. To quote from Norman Spinrad's *Stayin' Alive* (where he has spoken of these problems more lucidly than I have here); --

> "...one of the cultural functions science fiction should have been performing more centrally all along is that of generating self-cancelling prophecies, of keeping society alert to possible pits in the road up ahead."

Summary and Conclusion

So by way of Isaac Asimov's four stages I have added an alternative five: 1926-1938 Sense of Wonder; 1938-1950 Scientific and Social Naivety; 1950-1965 Dread; 1965-1980 Confusion; and 1980 onwards Schisms.

Science fiction in its pulp incarnation was most clearly defined by its obsession with technology (mock, pseudo or authentic), its faith in technology's promise as a panacea, and its lack of interest in political and especially social problems.

World events -- World War II, the Atom Bomb, the Cold War, Korea and Vietnam -- dealt a body blow to the technologically faithful, producing a resentment of politics and politicians that has contributed to the ghettoisation of SF. There was a split, the first of many, in which human problems of society began to be discussed. But with the 60's turbulence of rejection and near frantic pursuit of lifestyles promising Nirvana, the discussion and even the perception diffused and lost direction during the years of Nixon and the oil crisis.

Out of the Nirvana Hunt, modern fantasy became a fully fledged genre. But it also suffered from the Confusion of the 70's although not as much as rational science fiction. *2010*, the *Star Wars* films, *Close Encounters* and *E.T.* may be seen by the general public as "sci-fi" (that awful contraction) but they all possess a significant ingredient of semi-religious transcendence. Their popularity is an indication of a widespread need for assurances that the good guys will win -- and that we can line up with them!

Hence the demand for fantasy novels with their mock-archaic prose, young fated heroes or displaced denizens of Earth (if you think on it, the fictional multiverse must be *aswarm* with jean-clad, guitar-playing students desperately searching for the legendary Original Plot!), and a climactic battle resulting in vindication, shallow humour and rampant happy-ever-afterisms.

It is important to realise that the Adventurists, the Technologists and the Sociologists are all firmly entrenched in this era of Schisms, albeit alienated from one and other. So don't go expecting much depth from the genrefied novel series and trilogies. Questions about free will, ambiguity, the consequences of our actions and responsibility for them, paradox, social problems -- imaginative explorations will be frequently avoided, even by the sociologists among us if they've chosen to shackle themselves to some ideology of Left or Right.

But as with rock music, the current state of speculative fiction isn't a complete blandout. The good stuff is there, but Sturgeon's Law applies today as much as it ever did in the 50's and 60's: 90% of SF is garbage, by which I mean average, pedestrian, just good enough. One main difference between the 60's and the 80's is the sheer volume of SF being published and read today, thus today's 90% of dreck is as an ocean next to yesteryear's swimming pool. For the 10% of angelic product it is like comparing a paddling pool with a puddle.

Marketing is the other great difference between the ages. Everything is marketed -- presidents, prime ministers, pictures, pills and paperbacks. I suspect that punk/new wave rock is the last great youth rebellion: at first the record companies were thrown off balance, but it only took them a couple of years to absorb the movement and, by marketing its dissent, neutralise it. Just as the seven inch 45 record has become a multi-purpose marketing device for the music industry, so is this trend discernible at the bottom end of the SF paperback market. More particularly in America where meaning and art take poor second and third places behind commercial demographics in the list of publishing criteria.

The title of this article included the word 'philosophy' and thus far there seems to have been damn little mention of it. From one point of view that is hardly surprising -- practically no SF author is going to sit down at his typewriter and rattle on about Hegel, Marx, Hume, Popper and the rest of the gang. On the other hand, we all take a great many things for granted and a lot of these assumptions are of a philosophical nature. It is these philosophical assumptions and aspirations that determine how society works, and thus how SF is treated, both commercially and culturally.

Conversely, SF fandom has been locked in a ghetto mentality for a long time now, and if there are any answers they must involve opening up fandom to the outside world and to inner debate. There has to be interaction with the outer world -- after all, if we consider the sheer wealth of intelligence and talent among the writers and fans, perhaps we *can* make a difference, real and tangible, to a real world that is in real trouble. It is time SF fandom came of age, before time runs out.

Finally, I have to acknowledge the possibility that the thrust of this article may be completely and utterly wrong, that my historical designations are totally arbitrary, and that I'm suffering from bunker-digging paranoia.

Could be.

But I have a gnawing feeling that I am at least partially right. In any case, an SF literature can make us think about possibilities and thus learn more about ourselves.

The pressing question is; are we learning what we need and is our learning keeping pace with our changing needs?

CORRECTION

In the first part of Mike Cobley's article in *V136*, the Walter Lippman quote should end "they are likely to have the most power", not "unlikely"; in the following paragraph, "democratic society" should read "democratic majority". Sorry!

BOOKS

REVIEWS EDITED BY
Paul Kincaid

TRILLION YEAR SPREE: THE HISTORY OF SCIENCE FICTION -- Brian Aldiss with David Wingrove [Gollancz, 1986, 511pp, £15 h/b, £9.95 p/b]
Reviewed by David V Barrett

FIRST OF ALL, IN CASE MY LATER CRITICisms give the wrong impression, let me say unreservedly that if you only have two books about SF on your shelves, *Trillion Year Spree* should be one of them. (The other, of course, should be the Nicholls *Encyclopedia*.) It is an excellent history of SF from wherever you might think the genre begins, almost to the present day. So why the reservations? The previous sentence indicates two of them.

First, Aldiss insists on a starting point: 1818, with Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. Now, just as good a case can be made for that as for 1926 (Gernsback's *Amazing*) or 1726 (Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*). Or, some would say, Jules Verne, Genesis or Gilgamesh. It all depends on how you define SF, a debate which has been going on for decades, and which I would be happy to see surface from time to time in *Vector*. It's fun, it can be instructive -- but it mustn't be dogmatic. Any writer who attempts to define SF ends up with a different definition. Aldiss's, for the record, is:

"*...the search for a definition of mankind and his status in the universe which will stand in our advanced but confused state of knowledge (science), and is characteristically set in the Gothic or post-Gothic mode.*"

Somewhat wordy, not a little pretentious -- and allowing neatly for only one possible first SF novel: *Frankenstein*. Which came first, I wonder: the definition, or the decision that Mary Shelley is the mother of science fiction?

And it's not that he had to start somewhere; Aldiss spends chapters on "honourable ancestors" of SF. But by insisting that nothing before *Frankenstein* can be called SF he is led to rather silly evasions like this, about *Gulliver's Travels*:

"*It is fortunate that this masterly work does not count as science fiction... for, if it did so count, then perfection would have been achieved straightaway, and the genre possibly concluded as soon as it had begun.*"

Incidentally, Aldiss's thesis that SF's roots lie firmly in Gothic literature certainly seems vindicated each time I look at the new titles in *Forbidden Planet*: an overwhelming preponderance of fairytale palaces, and castles cold and grim, of beautiful women brightly jewelled and richly gowned, and hag-ridden creatures too horrifying to contemplate, of overdedicated brilliant scientists, and dreadful plots of crazed megalomaniacs. Pure Gothic.

But Aldiss should have shown the even greater debt that horror and fantasy, rather than SF, owe to the Gothic. And he misses a glorious opportunity to discuss John Crowley's *Little, Big* and Mark Helprin's *Winter's Tale* as perfect examples of modern American Gothic. He also doesn't deal with this problem: if SF is born of the Gothic, whence came the shift from the female bias of the Gothic to the male domination and appeal of SF?

My second major complaint against *Trillion Year Spree* is how Aldiss treats British writers of the last few years: scantily. Gwynneth Jones and Mary Gentle get four or five lines each. Chris Evans is awarded a single sentence. Colin Greenland also gets one brief mention -- but as a critic, not as an author.

And considering the vital importance of the short story in SF, how can Aldiss possibly get away with saying of Garry Kilworth -- arguably the best short story writer in *any* genre in the English language today (and see *Vector 136*) -- nothing more than "the stories in his 1984 collection, *The Songbirds of Pain*, show him to be strongest as a short story writer," with no critical evaluation whatsoever beyond that bare statement?

In any work of this size, some printing errors are inevitable; two should be pointed out for correction in future editions. First, all the page headings in Chapter VIII read VII, which is confusing; second, EE Doc Smith's famous six-volume series is mistakenly given as the *Skylark* series rather than the *Lensman* series, which is unfortunate.

I've only mentioned Aldiss throughout, but his collaborator in producing this major rewrite and expansion of *Billion Year Spree* (1973) should not be forgotten. Every critic, including Aldiss, has the right to be opinionated, to have favourites, to pursue obsessions. David Wingrove (a former editor of *Vector*) has, I feel, tempered Aldiss's prejudices to some degree, making this a more balanced, substantial and worthwhile book than it might otherwise have been.

Despite my cavils, as I said at the beginning, *Trillion Year Spree* is essential reading for anyone serious about SF. If you haven't already, go out and buy it. It's annoyed the hell out of me in places -- but I certainly wouldn't be without it.

◆

THE BEST SCIENCE FICTION OF ISAAC ASIMOV - Isaac Asimov
[Grafton, 1987, 320pp, £10.95]
Reviewed by Jim England

THAT THIS IS A COLLECTION OF THE BEST SF stories of Isaac Asimov is as true as the oft-repeated claim about him being world-famous for his charming modesty. Asimov admits it is just a recycling of 28 stories selected for diverse reasons (not necessarily including merit) in his endearingly frank introduction. There was another *Best* collection in 1973 containing 12 items but, he points out, he has written more SF since then. The implication is that he has added the best of his subsequent stories but this is not the case. 20 stories in the collection were first published in the 1950s and most of the remainder are one or two pages based on wordplay of great silliness (the sort that appeals to pre-adolescents). No robot stories are included and, with peculiar logic, he has not included 'Nightfall' because he does not agree with writers and readers who claim it to be "the best of *any* science fiction short story" ever written (make sense of that if you can).

In all these stories there are what might loosely be termed 'ideas' and the idea is almost everything. "My speciality," says Asimov, "is highly cerebral reasoning." The prose style is as consistently inelegant as Asimov fans have come to expect and the characters remain cardboard. They do all the usual things that such characters do, never giving offense by rising above crude stereotypes no matter how long the story or how slight the idea. The second longest story, 'The Ugly Little Boy' (nearly 40 pages) is exceptional in that it is supposed to "tug at heartstrings" and "I can generally rely on people sniffing by the time they get to the end", but who sniffs is (to me) a mystery. It is sickening and unbelievable schmaltz about a prissy nurse who seems like a cross between cartoon versions of Mary Poppins and Florence Nightingale. "The first version of this story was rotten," but "the second version was great," Asimov informs a new generation of readers in what he supposes to be up-front modern parlance, so that they will not get any contrary and wrong ideas.

To end on an upbeat note there is just *one* story in the collection that I regard as brilliant - 'The Last Answer' (not to be confused with 'The Last Question'), first published in *Analog*, January 1980. Only seven pages long, it should be recommended reading for anyone wondering about the possible nature of God (the 'idea' is all it needed). It being recent, some old-timers (like me) may not have read it.

◆

B O O K S

CLAN GROUND - Clare Bell
[Gollancz, 1986, 258pp, £7.95]
Reviewed by Helen McNabb

THIS IS A SEQUEL TO *RATHA'S CREATURE*, with Ratha now in firm control of the group of sentient cats who call themselves the named, to distinguish them from the unintelligent unnamed, animal cats. *Ratha's Creature* dealt with Ratha's discovery of fire, how she learnt to use it as a means of protecting the clan, resulting in her becoming Clan Leader. *Clan Ground* is self-contained, it isn't essential to have read the first book to understand this one, although, as with any series, it does help.

Into the stable clan comes a disrupting influence, an unnamed cat of undoubted intelligence and remarkable bravery who wins acceptance into the clan and is named Shongshar, despite the reservations of herding leader Thakur. The plot follows the shifting of the balance of power from Ratha to Shongshar, and the complications which arise from that struggle.

As with the first book it is readable, fluently written and contains enough depth to retain an adult's interest although I never felt any emotional involvement with the characters because, despite the author's efforts, they remain two dimensional. The beginnings of a worship of fire were interesting and well handled, as was the discovery and domestication of a monkey-like creature by Thakur, but the absence of emotional depth mars the rest of the author's achievements. It is an agreeable enough book but not a brilliant one, a nice enough book for cat fanciers that should suit its pre-adolescent market well, but it doesn't have that extra dimension which would lift it above the ordinary.

CLOSE ENCOUNTERS WITH THE DEITY - Michael Bishop
[Peachtree Press, 1986, 307pp, $15.95]
Reviewed by David Wingrove

MICHAEL BISHOP HAS GOT GOD, IN THE same way that he earlier 'got' Aliens and Anthropology, as an obsessionally-pursued subject. Here, in an aptly-named collection, he displays a few of the nine billion names of the deity.

Bishop's last collection, *One Winter in Eden*, hasn't, so far as I know, attracted a British publisher, perhaps because it is difficult to pigeonhole its contents. Little of his work is overtly science-fictional, and his approach has more in common with Kafka and Borges than Kingsbury and Brin. But whereas *Eden* illustrated the range and excellence of Bishop as a short story writer, *Deity* displays a narrower, less interesting writer than we're accustomed to.

Taken individually many of these stories deserve mention. 'Voices', a modernist fable about a boy who is a perfect ventriloquist/mimic, but who also suffers from voices in his head, is Bishop at his second best. 'A Gift from the Graylanders', about boyhood, family cruelty and Nuclear War, almost hits target. 'Alien Graffiti', which concerns inexplicable alien intrusions - skywriting of a deific or possibly alien kind - begins beautifully, only to bog itself down in a web of rationalisation. Most enjoyable, perhaps, is 'The Bob Dylan Tambourine Software & Satori Support Services Consortium, Ltd', which first saw light of day in *Interzone*.

Elsewhere, however, Bishop is caught between trivialities and over-ponderous dei-fiction. In the former his style blunts the necessary humour - as in 'Storming the Bijou, Mon Amour', an irritatingly unsatisfactory story about the Gods of Hollywood, but with the best one-liner in the book: "He was 301,614 movies old and not getting any younger." 'Dog's Lives' is perhaps the best of the lesser stories; its contrived ending grates, though it must be said that Bishop's writing props up the weak storyline.

Perhaps the most dissatisfying element is the overtly theistic material. Bishop looks at his deific phenomena exhaustively from every angle, and that's the problem. The stories are hard going, *meaningful* in the pejorative sense. The profundity striven for simply isn't there.

Perhaps some enterprising publisher will take the best from *One Winter in Eden* and *Close Encounters with the Deity* and create a volume which demonstrates the real strengths of Michael Bishop as a short story writer. Alas, this doesn't.

THE MEN WHO MASTERED TIME - David Butler
[Heinemann, 1986, 262pp, £10.95]
Reviewed by David V. Barrett

DAVID BUTLER'S FIRST NOVEL IS A quaintly old-fashioned artifact, in everything from its title to its characters, plot and literary style. Wells could have written it, or Wyndham perhaps. Yet it is not a pastiche, as Priest's *The Space Machine* or Aldiss's *Frankenstein Unbound*; this is genuinely old-fashioned. Butler is chairman of a management consultancy company and a well known figure in the computer industry. But unlike most technocrats who think they can write, Butler actually *can* - though I suspect he has read little SF since his public school and Oxford days.

The Men Who Mastered Time are Steerforth, a young duke who owns a successful publishing company, has played cricket for England, and is a brilliant mathematician; and Khan, who came to an English public school when his family were slaughtered in Amritsar in 1947, and went on to become a brilliant physicist. Dreadfully overused stereotypes both, as is the narrator, Professor Hawkesworth, once Steerforth and Khan's housemaster, then a don at their Oxford college, now in his declining years.

The story is told largely through Steerforth's reminiscences to Hawkesworth, a convenient way of segmenting an otherwise linear tale and relating events from the past to appropriate stages of the investigation.

> But I swear to you, Hawkesworth, that every word I propose to tell you about Khan and myself and our work together is the plain truth. He and I ... have unravelled one of the greatest secrets of the universe. It is one that man has dreamed of solving for many years. But it's a nightmare too, one that awakens me in terror when it's upon me. And if I am right in what I have worked out, if I have correctly guessed Inayat Khan's plans, why then the fate of all mankind may be in the balance.

Khan has disappeared into the past, with the intention, Steerforth believes, of recreating the future in his own image. Following a scattered trail of clues from Coleridge, especially his 'Kubla Khan', Steerforth and Hawkesworth set out to save the world from his megalomania.

For any reader even slightly familiar with time travel novels there are no surprises; every plot development is telegraphed chapters in advance. Yet this is one of the most entertaining novels I have read in a long time. Butler's gentlemanly prose, and the cosily hackneyed nature of the plot, make this feel on first reading like a treasured book you have returned to out of sheer love and enjoyment.

THE SHIFT - Hugh Cook
[Cape, 1987, 215pp, £9.95]
Reviewed by Edward James

THIS IS PROBABLY THE RARE CASE OF A book whose blurb accurately describes its content and tone:

> A hilarious post-nuclear extravaganza ... involving, among other things, intergalactic war, espionage, torture, a photographer from *Panties* magazine, the Mafia, heroin-smuggling, Troy's arch-enemy Mr Barlzebub ...

and so on. Including the Spang, "fluorescent-orange alien invaders, with hooded green eyes, ravenous sexual appetites and an affinity for bonsai." If you have any desire to read further, the plot involves the machinations of the power-mad Iridian Troy to dominate the world; the book's title is the name given to a machine his employees are constructing in the Antarctic, which can selectively alter human history.

The book, as you can see, is intended as humour. And some of it is vaguely humourous, at a consistently low level. For example, a list of 20th Century classics found on a yacht:

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A Child's Guide to Race Relations by Zola Budd; ... *Sources of My Importance* by Colin Wilson; ... *Austrian Vines and their Antidotes* by the World Health Organisation ...

And no doubt some would find other elements of the plot screamingly funny. The alien conquerers demand the surrender of all human females:

> For what purpose? To be raped? To be eaten? For aliens to lay eggs in their bodies? For their children to play with? Nobody liked to ask. Finally one man went forward to enquire. The aliens told him. He returned to his fellows, refused to answer questions, and killed himself within the hour ... The men of the world realised resistance was futile. They were going to hand over their women to the conquerers. There was no alternative. Or was there? It turned out there was, and very soon women all over the world were being piled into huge heaps, doused with kerosine then burnt alive; thus effectively saving them from the horrors of whatever it was the aliens planned to do with them. (pp 201-2)

Biting satire? No, proof of a very unpleasant interest in cruelty and torture, which is more graphically evidenced at other places in the book. A nasty, immature sense of humour, therefore, in a book which adds nothing to the canon of science fiction. Ken Lake told us in *Vector 136* that it made the New Zealand author Cook a finalist in the 1985 Times/Cape Young Writers' Competition. God help us, and God help Cape.

SHADES OF DARKNESS - Richard Cowper
[Kerosina, 1986, 143pp, £10.95]
Reviewed by Helen McNabb

THIS BOOK IS FULL OF ECHOES OF OTHER writers - the most obvious are Graham Greene, referred to in the story, and Conrad, whose *Heart of Darkness* is remembered in the title and has associations with so much of the background. It isn't necessary to have read them to enjoy the book, but they add depth and texture to it, like figures in a landscape they give more idea of perspective and scale. This novel has different levels, different angles of approach, all of which can be equally pleasing, it just depends from which direction the reader is coming.

It starts in Africa. An investigative journalist is thrown out of Uganda and returns home to write an exposé for his paper, only to be thrown off that as well. He has something to say and deprived of his usual channel of communication, on the urging of friends, decides to say it in a novel: the truth, the whole truth, more than could have appeared in the paper, clothed in a light disguise of fiction. To avoid distraction he rents an isolated cottage on the Essex coast, which is where the story switches tracks and becomes, on one level, a ghost story. And this is where the plot synopsis stops because I don't want to give it away. It *is* a ghost story, but not a horror story, or at any rate the horror is that in the hearts of men. It is also a love story. It is built up gently, the hero is sceptical, he resists believing so that his final conviction is the more credible, and it is the sort of ghost that many can believe in because it is a ghost made from unhappiness, guilt and loneliness. It is never explained, neither is the cat; what, if anything, really happened is left for the reader to judge, but the whole story is never less than gripping.

I once saw Cowper's work described as watercolours. It was meant as an insult, but it struck me as having a certain amount of truth, not as an insult, but as a compliment. Watercolours require good technique, skill and great delicacy. All of which Cowper has. His books aren't bold dollops of primary colours, they are more detailed, less vivid, more thoughtful, less flashy. In this book he paints a picture of a ghost story on a windswept Essex coast, and in the detail and the depth are the darkness of the title and the heat of an alien country with a culture and life we cannot really understand. It is a beautifully written, eminently readable book. I recommend it unreservedly.

THE WONDROUS PHYSICIAN - Jorge de Sena (trans. Mary Fitton)
[Dent, 1986, 123pp, £3.95]
Reviewed by K.V.Bailey

DE SENA, PORTUGUESE ACADEMIC, POET and novelist, died in 1978. *O Fisicio Prodigioso* is here available for the first time in English, translated by Mary Fitton in a prose conveying images of brilliance and clarity. Her verse translation is equally felicitous. De Sena took two 15th century *exemplos* or moral tales, extracted their themes and wove them, with other strands of legend and popular lore, into a fantasy which he regarded as experimental and, at its deeper symbolic levels, autobiographical.

De Sena's ballad-like poems are among several features which give the book an experimental flavour. Its chapters are prefaced by woodcuts, naively Gothic, which reflect the symbolism and lend 'period' atmosphere. Presentational uniformity is further broken by passages of bifurcated narrative, ie. splitting into parallel columns to follow variant lines of perception and action. The appended original *exemplos* and the author's discursive and scholarly notes have the effect of additionally 'enclosing' and 'artificialising' his story, though, paradoxically, in doing so they increase rather than diminish its power.

The *exemplos* are simple: DeSena's development of them sophisticated. The first theme is the physician who cheats death and resurrects corpses by the magic of virgin blood; De Sena's development creates a kind of "garden (or palace) of earthly delights", erotic, hedonistic, but ensnaring and guilt-haunted. The second is a man's pact with the devil, who saves him from hanging that he may catch him more souls by spreading evil. Torture, revolution, pillage characterise the development, the scene is one of repression and anarchy: but a flower is rooted in the dung of death. Though the original *exemplos* are unconnected, De Sena fuses them, the Wondrous Physician and his Lady bridging them in their sequential rôles of lovers, victims, avatars. The dialectically resolving image is the rose tree, in the flowering of which polarities disappear and re-emerge. The story's close is marvellously subtle - and ambiguous.

Swords and sorceries this book contains: "sword and sorcery" it is not. In imagery it is sometimes reminiscent of the paintings of Brueghel and Bosch: in metaphoric tone of alchemy, of Venusberg legends and the Grail mysteries. Stemming from the later Middle Ages, its fantasies are ageless; its psychological symbolism and "message", as developed by De Sena, contemporarily relevant. It is good to have so fine a work of the imagination in so readable a translation.

THE MAN WHOSE TEETH WERE ALL EXACTLY ALIKE - Philip K. Dick
[Paladin, 1986, 256pp, £2.95]
HUMPTY DUMPTY IN OAKLAND - Philip K. Dick
[Gollancz, 1986, 199pp, £9.95]
Reviewed by Paul Kincaid

PHILIP K.DICK'S SCIENCE FICTION IN THE 1950s was successful and popular, but it didn't approach the achievements of later in his career. Nor did it fully satisfy him as writer, and during the late 50s and early 60s he made considerable efforts as a mainstream novelist. All this work was rejected, and languished for two decades among his private papers. Since his death, however, his reputation has earned deserved publication for all these books, the two latest of which have just appeared from Paladin and Gollancz. Looking at them now it is perhaps understandable why they received the thumbs-down 25 and more years ago. His literary style is flat, he has an obsession with the minutiae of daily life, his subject matter is the lower middle class, working people and their petty jealousies and problems. When this ordinariness was set against the questions of reality and understanding that drove his SF it acquired a resonance that made his work magical. On their own they are, well, hardly the stuff of which best-sellers are made.

Yet with hindsight we can see in them not only the qualities we all applaud in Dick's work, but the patient working out of his favourite themes. *The Man Whose Teeth were all Exactly Alike*, for instance, written just before his triumphal return to SF with *The Man in the High Castle*, contains echoes of, for example, *The Penultimate Truth*. A quarrel between neighbours Leo Runcible and Walt Dombrosio escalates

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inevitably until Runcible discovers what may be a Neanderthal skull, or maybe a clever forgery by Dombrosio, but which certainly reveals some far reaching truths about his village to estate agent Runcible.

This sense of pettiness escalating inevitably to tragedy informs *Humpty Dumpty in Oakland*, when Jim Fergesson decides to sell his garage. Al Miller, who sublets part of the lot for his second-hand car sales, worries that Fergesson may be being rooked, and his concern leads him into shadowy realms of big business and crime.

Neither book shows off Dick at his very best, but still the sharpness, the sad humour, the precise ordinariness of people and place, make them well worth reading.

THE BRAVE LITTLE TOASTER - Thomas M. Disch (Illustrated by Karen Lee Schmidt)
[Grafton, 1986, 78pp, £5.95]
Reviewed by Mike Dickinson

THOMAS M. DISCH, ARGUABLY AMERICA'S premier SF writer, author of such classics as *On Wings of Song*, tries his hand at children's writing; or, especially remembering that this originated in the *Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*, does he?

Certainly the style is extremely simple, using no polysyllabic words or extended metaphors; it is also illustrated in a competent but uninspiring way by experienced children's artist Karen Lee Schmidt. The story is a simple one. Five electrical appliances, living in a cottage on the edge of the forest, feel lonely and unloved, not having seen their master for three years. With commendable mechanical ingenuity they set out to find him, encountering a sexually rampant daisy, genderist squirrels and the horrors of the city dump. Their immediate quest is a failure, but all ends happily.

Doubts, however, set in early. It is clearly inspired by, and a parody of, *The Incredible Journey* - a situation elluded to in the opening section where the machines compare themselves to a small dog, Grover, which has recently completed such a journey. Would many children identify with a toaster, an electric blanket, a Hoover, a lamp and a radio, or understand the reason why they are not amused by the squirrel's dirty jokes? Despite their asexuality, the machines are delineated in anthropomorphic terms and some incidental humour is generated by this, such as the blanket's sulks when it is called a "wet blanket", a key to its character. This may appeal to some, but the initial effect is a rather crunching tweeness.

There are, of course, other ways of interpreting the fable: the scenes in the city dump, the machines' constantly reiterated desire to serve, and their similarly frequent remarks on their robustness, imply a critique of the use-and-throw-away society. The subtitle, 'A Bedtime Story for Small Appliances', suggests some sort of allegory with the human condition - "we're all tools who need to find a purpose and/or God" sort of thing.

The result of suspecting these sly purposes is to give the story a more adult context than it demands - though its provenance argues not. If you have children try it on them, it may work; but Disch seems to me to have fallen between two stools.

THE CHILDREN OF ASHGAROTH - Richard Ford
[Grafton, 1986, 444pp, £10.95]
Reviewed by Sue Thomason

IMAGINE TAKING A BOTTLE OF YOUR FAVourite fizzy drink from the fridge (champagne or Irnbru, it matters not). Imagine it sweating with coolness on a hot summer's day. Pour out a glassful, take it into the garden ... and leave it to stand for a few hours. The result will have pretty much the flavour of this book: spirit but no sparkle.

The book opens promisingly in a small community of vegan non-interventionists who will not kill for food, cultivate land, or domesticate animals. They subsist by foraging, eat leaves, berries, nuts, seaweed, honey (presumably gathered from wild hives without killing any bees - *ouch!*), and various fungi. Not surprisingly, they realise they're going to starve fairly soon unless they Do Something About It.

The Council of Elders take the painful decision to allow the killing of animals for food, and the clearing of land for crops. This is only to feed the old and the ill who cannot forage for themselves, only the bare minimum of environmental manipulation will be allowed, and any killing must be quick and painless. The villagers immediately start widespread slash-and-burn clearance of the surrounding forest, and indiscriminate butchering of anything on four legs.

The reason is: Men (and Logic) were created by Dreagg the Evil God and are essentially Bad; animals, elves and Magic were created by Ashgaroth the Good God and are Good. (Presumably women arise by spontaneous combustion, but we won't go into that; in this book Men are Men, Villains are Thugs, and Women wear clothes that never quite conceal their Feminine Charms). Bracca, our Hero, sets off to find and separate the Three Seeds of Logic. This will destroy the corrupt human race, leaving the earth free to become an Unspoiled Paradise through natural regeneration. I am giving nothing away in revealing that after the usual trials and temptations, he succeeds. The nasty men all die, the nice men turn into elves, and the good main characters from this novel meet the good main characters from the previous books of the trilogy (*Quest for the Faradawn* and *Melvaig's Vision*) and live happily ever after.

Imagine an eternity of flat Lambrusco. Read this book and you won't have to.

VALLEY OF LIGHTS - Stephen Gallagher
[NEL, 1987, 192pp, £9.95]
Reviewed by Alex Stewart

GALLAGHER'S FIRST NOVEL, *THE LAST ROSE of Summer*, was his last substantial piece of conventional SF. With *Chimera* he began producing distinctive and disturbing stories which mingle SF and the supernatural with the traditional narrative structure of the thriller.

Valley of Lights is his first novel in which the fusion of genres is completely seamless. It starts quietly, when Sergeant Volchak of the Phoenix PD receives a routine call to a sleezy motel. Volchak is one of those tenacious cops so common in thrillers; unable to let go of an interesting problem, he becomes drawn into a personal vendetta against a hideously powerful and malevolent adversary. Traditional horror themes, like possession and the living dead, are skillfully blended with the real American nightmares of the serial killer and the urban underground. As the struggle grows more desperate, wheeling across the city and the Arizona desert, the very lives of the people around Volchak become pawns to be used against him.

Gallagher's use of a first person narrator has given him much greater control of his material than in his previous thriller/chillers, the pacing is noticeably tighter, and the writing sharper. Volchak is a complex and likeable character convincingly bewildered by the situation he finds himself in. At one point he muses:

> Most of what I knew came from speculation and deduction. It wasn't like in the books, where someone pops up with all the answers in an ancient manuscript.

Nevertheless the answers are all there, emerging naturally in the course of the narrative. The bones of the plot are in danger of showing through in a few places, but are fleshed out for the most part with a well-drawn and convincingly quirky supporting cast. Even a drift into movie logic at the climax has been adequately defused earlier, although it seems to stretch the limits of Volchak's methodical nature.

As usual with Gallagher, one of his greatest strengths is sense of place - here the timeless, unchanging Arizona desert incongruously juxtaposed with the teeming streets of Phoenix - which enfolds the characters, throwing their actions into stark relief. The image of Phoenix at night, like a huge, thriving organism, is one of the most haunting and lyrical in the book.

In short, *Valley of Lights* is unhesitatingly recommended. Not only is it Gallagher's best book to date, it should be the breakthrough to the wider audience he so richly deserves.

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A BAG OF MOONSHINE - Alan Garner
[Collins, 1986, 144pp, £8.95]
Reviewed by Maureen Porter

IN HIS *BOOK OF BRITISH FAIRY TALES*, Alan Garner emphasised the fact that the fairy tale was originally told rather than written down, and attempted to recreate this effect through the pitch, cadence and colloquial richness of his language. The stories cried out to be read aloud which was surely the mark of success.

The same can be said of his splendid new collection *A Bag of Moonshine*. In some respects it harks back to his earlier work in *The Guizer* and *A Book of Goblins*, both collections being arranged around a theme, but in contrast no particular point is drawn from the assembly of stories about Jack the lad, the character who always come out on top despite being apparently shiftless. Nor are all the tales about Jack. Garner includes, among others, an excellent retelling of the story concerning the Fairy of Llyn y Fan Fach, as well as a spine-chilling tale of a girl turned into a mole after selling her soul to the devil for jewels and a velvet dress.

Again these are stories to be read aloud. Although the stories are drawn from a number of English and Welsh sources, Garner uses a colloquial style which owes something to the speech patterns of his native Cheshire without destroying the colour and life of the original, and where possible retains the narrative tricks of the original storyteller. It is also clear that he is now more at ease with the voice he uses. Whilst I much enjoyed the previous collection of stories, I felt there was a slight self-consciousness about them which is not so with *A Bag of Moonshine*.

What I do find a little off-putting about this book is the inclusion of some indifferent colour plates. Sadly, the artist Patrick James Lynch cannot match the beauty and vigour of his own black-and-white text illustrations in these plates, and I think it might have been wiser to leave them out altogether. On the other hand, I accept that some people judge a book by appearence rather than contents. I can only say that I found the contents more than satisfactory and would recommend this book to anyone who wants to hear the authentic voice of the story teller.

GOD GAME - Andrew M. Greeley
[Century, 1986, 308pp, £9.95]
Reviewed by Chris Barker

GOD GAME IS ONE OF A GROWING NUMBER of SF novels concerned with recent innovations in personal computer technology - in this case interactive fantasy games. Greeley's a Roman Catholic priest whose previous novels have been mainstream; his approach to the themes of this novel are, therefore, somewhat unusual. However, it must be remembered Catholics have made an important contribution to fantasy and SF (Tolkien, Miller, Lafferty, Wolfe) before one dismisses the book out of hand.

The story is narrated by a fairly trendy Catholic priest who is almost interchangeable with the author. He is presented with the latest fantasy game, 'Duke and Duchess', by a computer buff who wants him to test it. The game is transformed from an adventure with crude graphic characters to an alternative cosmos with apparantly real people in high resolution colour by a freak flash of lightning (groan!), but having established this link between worlds by somewhat dubious means, Greeley's novel begins to come to life. The Duke and Duchess are engaged in a long-standing conflict fought with a combination of medieval weaponry and 'zap-guns', and the narrator, who finds himself still in control of the 'game' via his computer keyboard, becomes a benevolent manipulator trying to bring peace between the warring factions. As this interaction continues the narrator finds the characters are less and less maleable to his whims, interestingly paralleled by the transformation of the characters from cardboard cut-outs to real 'flesh' - a process often experienced by writers (or Gods?) with their creations. This makes it difficult for him to bring about a 'happy-ending', and adds depth to the story.

There is considerable philosophical speculation about the nature of the two 'cosmi' - ours and theirs - which is not always well placed, but does give the novel a more serious approach. This is not to say that the book is without humour, brought out mainly by the narrator's frustrations with characters bent on undoing his charitable work. I did find the name-dropping of other literary works and their authors a little irritating, and there was one major gaff at the beginning of the book when Greeley describes this alternative world: "their world was different from ours in the sort of tiny way that an SF writer would not imagine". I would dispute this, but it is true that Greeley has treated his subject matter more skillfully than many SF authors might have done.

TALES OF DUNGEONS AND DRAGONS - Ed. Peter Haining
[Century, 1986, 406pp, £11.95]
Reviewed by Rosemary Pardoe

APPEARANCES TO THE CONTRARY, THIS IS not a book for devotees of fantasy rôle-playing games. In fact the dreadful and misleading title seems guaranteed to repel the very readers who would enjoy this collection of thirty short stories. The book is divided into three equal parts: 'The Sealed Section: Tales of Horror', 'The Ghost Section: Tales of the Supernatural' and 'The Wonder Section: Tales of Fantasy'. The common factor is that, for one reason or another, the stories have never appeared in their author's collected works. M.R.James' 'The Malice of Inanimate Objects' and Sheridan Le Fanu's 'Borrhomeo the Astrologer' are typical examples. The first, a delicious black joke, was published in an Eton ephemeral in 1933, two years after James' *Collected Ghost Stories*. It was rediscovered by Michael Cox and reprinted for the first time in 1984. Le Fanu's story sank into even greater obscurity following its anonymous publication in 1862. Although the identity of the author had been suspected, the first person to produce a thoroughly convincing case was Le Fanu's biographer, W.J. McCormack, in 1980. In recent years this superbly eerie tale of plague in 17th century Milan has been reprinted twice, but only in small press and limited edition booklets.

Others represented in *Tales of Dungeons and Dragons* include Bram Stoker, Edgar Allen Poe, Fritz Leiber, John Wyndham, William Hope Hodgson, Algernon Blackwood, William Morris, Lord Dunsany, Robert E.Howard and H.P. Lovecraft. Some stories are rather too well known to deserve inclusion (for instance Stephen King's 'The Mangler'), but others are truly rare, having been unavailable in print for fifty years or more. It must be said that several of them fully deserve to remain forgotten, but there are sufficient of high quality (often better than some of their authors' more popular efforts) to make this a very worthwhile collection.

Peter Haining has done a fine job in putting the anthology together, though I would criticise him slightly for not always giving credit where it is due in his introductions to some of the stories.

THE PROTEUS OPERATION - James P. Hogan
[Century, 1986, 496pp, £11.95]
Reviewed by Keith Freeman

THE BOOK STARTS IN 1975 IN A WORLD where North America's the last remaining bulwark of democracy in a Nazi/Japan dominated world. Atomic war is threatening ... and a small group of "Special Operatives" (commandos, saboteurs plus) are sent back via a not fully understood time machine to 1939. The plan is to alter history, and it soon transpires that *some* "recorded events" begin to change. The paradox of what happens to the future the heroes came from is neatly solved - every event spawns alternate worlds. This cross between time travel and alternate worlds is an effective way of having both a changeable world in 1939 *and* a 1975 future to try and contact.

Although the basic plan seems to be working, that is Britain's resolve is strengthened, the contacting of 1975 is more intractible. It's soon revealed that the time machine was "stolen" from further into the future. A small group of dissidents from 2025 - an apparant utopia - had sent a timegate back to 1925 to cause the Nazi tyrany.

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Mixed in with the confusion (?) outlined above is good basic adventure storytelling, as the team struggle to overcome the problems besetting them. Nazi spies, hoodlums and the USA emerging from the depression all add to their troubles. History (as we know it) is recounted, with the alternative histories that could have happened well worked out. The sense of realism is augmented by the use of figures such as Churchill, Einstein and, er, Isaac Asimov (who's in the story for a real reason besides the "in joke").

The loose ends combine after an exciting commando operation to enter the Nazi-2025 timegate to destroy it before the Nazis are given atomic weapons. The tale carries from 1940 to 2025 and back before a successful climax is reached.

I thoroughly enjoyed this book and my only quibble came fairly early on when it was expounded that totalitarian states couldn't be expected to make technical/scientific breakthroughs. Both Nazi Germany and Russia would seem to deny this. Having been disappointed in the past with this author's books I'm very happy to recommend this one wholeheartedly.

ICE - Anna Kavan
[Peter Owen, 1986, 158pp, £8.95]
Reviewed by Colin Greenland

AT ONE POINT IN *ICE* THE NARRATOR, A wealthy, rootless mercenary, abducts the frail, helpless woman of his dreams from a refugee hostel, dragging her by the arm out of a city filled with panic and snow. Six mounted policemen ride up. The woman shouts for help, tries to get free.

> I held on to her tight, kept her close beside me. The men laughed and whistled at us as they passed, disappearing in the blowing white. She burst into tears.

This chilling monochrome image of the breakdown of civilization, the forces of law and order callously complicit in the devastation, makes a vivid illustration of what *Ice* is about, and what Anna Kavan was about when she wrote it. Such short but thoroughly disturbing shifts displace familiar phenomena to reveal the Abyss beneath. At the same time, this sequence is powerfully and deliberately ambiguous. A page later, carrying his companion through the chaos and carnage of an ice-blocked harbour to the ship that will take them to safety, the apparent rapist turns out to be a hero, rescuing this confused and frightened woman from imminent destruction. But no sooner is this view of events established than the man admits: "With one arm I warmed and supported her: the other arm was the executioner's."

Ice, first published in 1967, was the last and most successful book by a 66-year-old writer who took her pseudonym from her admiration for Franz Kafka and her inspiration from her lifelong addiction to heroin. In one sense the constantly imperilled woman is Kavan herself, her emotions frozen in a junk trance, watching the blood run down her arms in "remote surprise". Kavan's fiction has many of the qualities described in Althea Hayter's *Opium and the Romantic Imagination* - overwhelming paranoic hallucinations (of huge advancing cliffs of ice); sudden bouts of delight and despair;abrupt and discontinuous solitudes. They are all qualities shared with Coleridge and De Quincey by writers in the tradition of the English apocalyptic disaster novel, from M.P.Shiel's *The Purple Cloud* (now available again in paperback from Allison & Busby, £3.95) to the entire works of J.G.Ballard. As an obsessive, alienated exponent of the form writing among the fractured chemical illuminations of the 1960s, Kavan comes very close to Ballard here, both in theme ("the unreality of the outer world appeared to be an extension of my own disturbed state of mind") and in imagery:

> Closer, the trees round the house, sheathed in ice, dripped and sparkled with weird prismatic jewels ... The world had become an arctic prison from which no escape was possible, all its creatures trapped as securely as were the trees, already lifeless inside their deadly resplendent armour.
>
> It appeared that the situation at home was obscure and alarming, no precise information was coming through, the full extent of the disaster was not yet known.

Kavan's grasp of the futuristic dimension of her form was uncommonly good. She predicted not only the neutron bomb (but called it a cobalt bomb) but also the nuclear winter (though she said it would result from disintegrating ice-fields reflecting sunlight away from Earth). She was surprised and, at first, not pleased to be told she had written a science fiction book. The force of *Ice*, with its collapsing vistas and shattering uncertainties, is the cold light it throws on violence both human and inhuman: geophysical, political, military and especially sexual. Her eternal triangle of anonymous characters stalk each other around and around, exchanging masks in a dying world. "It was no longer clear to me which of us was the victim. Perhaps we were victims of one another."

Ice should have been filmed by Lindsay Anderson. It is a book for everyone who relishes the work of Kafka, William Burroughs, Ballard, Christopher Priest, M.John Harrison and Christopher Evans. Perhaps this welcome re-issue by Peter Owen will prompt Picador to reprint their 1973 paperback edition, with its valuable introduction by Brian Aldiss (who included Kavan as a character in several pieces in his 1977 collection *Last Orders*) and its haunting cover painting by Paul Delvaux.

THE WARRIORS OF TAAN - Louise Lawrence
[Bodley Head, 1986, 196pp, £4.50]
Reviewed by Tom A. Jones

THIS BOOK IS LABELLED *TEENAGE FICTION* and the blurb tells me Ms Lawrence specialises in that genre, but I'm not sure what it means. Whilst the book centres around young adults/teenagers it does not write down to its readers and is certainly more 'adult' than much SF - and I don't mean sex'n'violence.

The plot is not original. Outworlders have taken over and industrialised most of Taan. We are lead to believe they are from Earth but this is not stated explicitly. The natives are kept in reservations, albeit large ones. The aggression of the men, shown by futile raids on the Outworlders, is counterbalanced by the peace-loving Sisterhood. Standard feminism, except the Sisterhood is not beyond manipulation to achieve its aims. "The end justifies the means," our heroine says; I find that more aggressive than the outright physical violence of the warriors, and condone neither. To this add the Stonewraiths, strange creatures who have exiled themselves to tunnels in the earth but retain vestiges of an advanced science - *deus ex machina*.

The plot follows the Sisterhood's manipulation of the Prince of Taan, training him from a typical warrior into someone who desires peace:

> We must cease to hate each other and learn to live together ... men and women, sisters and warriors, Stonewraiths and Outworlders."

In so doing he can save his race and planet from destruction.

If this sounds destructive, it's not meant to be. Whilst there's nothing greatly original the story is well set out and on the whole well written in a straightforward and economical manner.

Unfortunately two things really annoy me. One chapter ends: "And all over the universe little lights were going out" - derivative, trite, spoiling what had been a carefully constructed section. Even more important, I could not believe the ending; to suggest you can "amputate" the bits you don't like from industrial society makes no allowance that such societies are complex, and tampering with them is just as likely to lead to catastrophe as tampering with the eco-sphere. But I think Ms Lawrence did believe what she wrote so at least it is not a cop-out.

This book isn't a masterpiece and it has its faults, but it is a good story and better than a lot of SF.

NERILKA'S STORY & THE COELURA - Anne McCaffrey
[Bantam, 1987, 192pp, £8.95]
Reviewed by Denise Gorse

TWO STORIES: 'NERILKA'S STORY: A PERN Adventure' is an adjunct to *Moreta: Dragonlady of Pern*, retelling it from the viewpoint of a minor character; 'The Coelura' finds McCaffrey in only slightly less familiar territory.

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McCaffrey admits (in a lengthy Prologue) that 'Nerilka's Story' is essentially an "ancillary tale", but nevertheless does her best to give enough background information to allow it to stand alone. She only partly succeeds: 'Nerilka's Story' is certainly comprehensible (even to someone completely unfamiliar with the Pern series), but somehow insubstantial. Time and again incidents occur which seem to have immense significance to everyone but Nerilka and myself; without knowledge derived from *Moreta* these potentially resonant moments fall flat. The heroine may be only dimly aware of what is happening around her, but the reader was not really intended to share her ignorance, and to that extent it is *not* self-contained.

'Nerilka's Story' is, at heart, a reworking of Cinderella, wicked stepmother and all. Finding father, Holder Lord Tolocamp, unsympathetic and new stepmother, vain and spiteful Anella, intolerable; Nerilka escapes to a rival hold dressed as a drudge. The story tells how she finds a vocation as a healer and attracts the attention of "unattainable" Lord Alessan. The emphasis is firmly on the latter, however, with Nerilka happily abandoning a chance to enter Healer Hall in favour of a life as Alessan's new Lady Holder.

'The Coelura' too contains a strong Cinderella element - although the setting this time is not feudal Pern but high technology Demeathorn. Spirited young Lady Caissa, at odds with her parents (father cool and autocratic, mother shallow and vain) is determined to make her own way in the world. However, once outside parental influence she wastes no time finding a personable aristocrat to fall in love with, and the story ends yet again with a wedding.

Despite their SF settings these are fundamentally pieces of romantic fiction - not necessarily a bad thing when well done, but these stories are not good examples of the genre (both heroes are rather bland, for example, and one ends up wondering what the heroines saw in them). Perhaps it is difficult to compress the machinery of a traditional romance into anything shorter than a novel. In both stories emotions come too fast, committments are made too easily. Anyone who enjoyed *Moreta* will probably find 'Nerilka's Story' of interest, but this is not McCaffrey at her best.

THE CHRONICLES OF CORUM - Michael Moorcock
[Grafton, 1986, 454pp, £9.95]
Reviewed by Mark Greener

THE CHRONICLES OF CORUM FORMS THE sequel omnibus to *The Swords of Corum* reviewed recently in *Vector*.

Yisselda has died, leaving near-immortal Corum morose and surly. He is tormented, in his sleep, by voices beseeching his aid in combatting the frost gods which are conquering the future earth. Corum believes the visions symptoms of encroaching madness. However Jhary-a-Conel informs him that the voices are not an hallucination and his aspect of the eternal champion is required in another place and another time.

This isn't the best of Moorcock's sword and sorcery novels. Corum embarks on quests to obtain magical aids to destroy the frost gods, which gives Moorcock the appropriate deus ex machina to extract the hero from various thorny situations. This results in the book having a somewhat contrived feel in places. However, this fault may be forgiven in view of the high quality of the writing. In spite of the staccato rhythm of the prose common to many s&s novels, the plot always aims for a resolution of the conflict and does not present distinct tableaux in the common manner. The characters are described in greater depth than is usual in fantasy novels although it falls far short of the superb characterisation shown in Moorcock's more mature work.

In common with all his fantasy, *The Chronicles of Corum*, is refreshingly free of the miscegenic, homoerotic, sadistic and sexist undertones which tarnish the genre. This may be due, in part at least, to Moorcock's political philosophy; these elements are most evident in those novels with the strongest right wing influence.

The Chronicles of Corum isn't the best in the eternal champion series. But it is vastly superior to the majority of drivel that drags the contemporary fantasy novel into the mire.

DEMAND THE IMPOSSIBLE: SCIENCE FICTION AND THE UTOPIAN IMAGINATION - Tom Moylan
[Methuen University Paperbacks, 1986, 242pp, no price quoted]
Reviewed by David Wingrove

IN A WAY THIS IS AN AMBITIOUS BOOK - an attempt to fuse science fiction, literary criticism and radical political commentary into a single, coherent argument. As such it is a distinctive, if not wholly unexpected approach to the modern science fiction utopia - or, to be more specific, to Joanna Russ's *The Female Man*, Ursula LeGuin's *The Dispossessed*, Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* and Samuel Delany's *Triton*. If the politics dominate, then that's a sign of Moylan's interest and, in criticising the critic, I shouldn't really take issue with it. That said, I *do*, because this over-emphasis on the political results in some curious value judgements as to the relative worth of the four texts under discussion.

Moylan's basic argument, which I tend to agree with, is that in the late 60s and early 70s the critical utopia was reborn out of radical political activism. Its form was different from both the traditional utopia and early 20th century dystopia. These "preconceptual images" are:

> the expression of the tendency of human beings to resist exploitation and oppression and to desire and work for freedom and fulfilment. The radical utopian impulse is part of the historical process of social struggle and change. It is the dream that moves us on.

In this it's hard to disagree with him. Where I begin to part company, however, is with his continual insistence that "the present is hell" and real life lies somewhere in the future. This is part of his militant, revolutionary, and overtly Marxist politics.

What results from this politicising of literary criticism works in the cases of Russ and Delany, both of whose texts balance and satisfy the novelistic and political demands of the reader. Here Moylan makes me want to go back to the books and re-read, which is good criticism. Where it goes wrong is in the other two instances - Piercy is uncritically praised, LeGuin ideologically damned. Moylan's commentary is one of the most perverse readings of *The Dispossessed* I've encountered, reduced to a "fairy-tale" full of "textual discontinuities and compromises". The memorable and powerful Shevek becomes a cypher: "the text reveals a message of male, individual, intellectual, elitist leadership rather than one of collective resistance and common victory". It makes *The Dispossessed* sound like something Jerry Pournelle might have bashed out. This is not only silly in the face of the novel's *real* effect on the reader, but shows Moylan's failure to do his homework. He believes there were only three novels before *The Dispossessed*, fails to comprehend its place within the *Ekumen* sequence (he seems not to know that 'The Day Before the Revolution' even exists!), and is unable to see that this is also a science fiction novel, not merely a sociological text book, which results in this *reductio ad absurdum*. It reduces *The Dispossessed* to the least of these four works. And that's surely wrong!

If this seems a bad review, that isn't to say I don't recommend this book. For all its irritating Marxist dogma and perverse readings and valuations of two of the four novels, it is a book that stretches the reader and sharpens one's attitudes towards those texts. In that its ambitions succeed.

THREE FANTASIES - John Cowper Powys
[Paladin, 1986, 186pp, £3.50]
Reviewed by Nik Morton

PALADIN IS BRINGING OUT A NUMBER OF good large format paperbacks, and now they have produced three stories by "the grandfather of magic realism". Powys harks from a prolific literary family and died aged 91 in 1963. J.B.Priestley called him: "One of the few English novelists of the last 50 years of whom it can be said that they have not talent but genius."

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So, with this kind of pedigree, what are we to make of these fantasies written between 1959 and 1960, towards the twilight of his life and novelistic career, and published here for the first time? My first appraisal was: inconsistent, whimsical, poorly written, without many redeeming features. But perhaps they should be viewed in a wider light. Notwithstanding the inconsistencies, the random philosophical speculation and wayward narratives, there is an intriguing underlying current to be plumbed. Repeatedly there are oblique references to Powys's own guilt over sexuality and aggressiveness which apparantly haunted his own life: more than one pair of his characters fail to consummate their union. And it is sadly significant that he used the violent words *rape* and *ravish* for the sexual congress between man and wife. There is comment on the magical fruitfulness of masturbation some ten years before Aldiss's once-controversial *Horatio Stubbs Saga*.

'Topsy-Turvy' relates the adventures of the souls of Topsy a picture and Turvy a door-handle. The animism is a feature of many of his novels. Poignantly, it is a picture of Powys's beloved sister, Nelly, who died in childhood, written all those decades later ... There is intriguing philosophy on how works of craft, of art, take on aspects of their creators' personalities. Here too emerge repeated references to the loss of virginity, "only through secretive violence of this kind does humanity progress"; to emasculation and to an agonising desire to "have a baby" which "nobody heeded".

'Abertackle' is a surrealistic space adventure which underpins the provisional and arbitrary nature of narratives - reference is made to the master of inconsequence, Laurence Sterne. Philosophical content relates to machines taking over from God, who is by the way dead. Crude comparisons are made between men and women, then humorously enlarged upon by observing that men don't touch their faces while women tend to constantly. And mention is seemingly made again to his dead sister, "I have a sister whom I love so much that I have hidden her away from our father and mother".

'Cataclysm', like his earlier novel *Morwyn* is anti-vivisectionist, an "infernally cruel practice". A crusade is set upon to eradicate all such scientists. Consideration is given to death: "But I'd sooner be dead ... than live ... with my ideas growing bigger and wiser and subtler and truer for years and years". And "Let's have the divine and delicious dullness of death". There is a character called Nelly. Not surprising by now, more sexual references are made, "taking" a woman relating to the sharing of sex? And there is emasculation, repeated from the previous story; admittedly lifted from mythology.

So, what are we to make of these stories? A knowledge of Powys's life might help: the Afterword by Glen Cavaliero provides more insight into a disturbing and troubled mind, whose intellectual honesty demands that he place his inmost repressions on paper, even if disguised thinly by fantasy and fable. The meanings between the lines provide an interesting exercise in pseudo-psychoanalysis. Suspend logic and go with the free-wheeling fancy and some of the whimsy will amuse, some of the irony will enliven, and some of the darker passages will make you wonder. Not easily accessible, but an interesting curiosity.

EQUAL RITES - Terry Pratchett
[Gollancz, 1987, 200pp, £9.95]
Reviewed by Barbara Davies

THIS SUCCESSOR TO *THE COLOUR OF MAGIC* and *The Light Fantastic* is set once more on Discworld, and continues the "funny, inventive and good-natured send-up of the fantasy genre" begun in the previous books.

In this adventure we meet several old acquaintances plus two new protagonists - Eskarina, potential girl wizard, and Granny Weatherwax, witch (not very) extraordinary who tries to outthink opponents by the use of "headology". The title is indicative of the subject matter, namely equal rights, magical rites and rites of passage. Eskarina, eighth daughter of an eighth son, inherits at birth a wizard's staff by mistake. There has never been a female wizard before. She and Granny must travel from their village of Bad Ass to the city of Ankh-Morpork - site of Unseen University - there to learn the skills necessary to control her increasingly uncontrollable powers.

Terry Pratchett is a dab hand at this sort of thing - building up tension with some serious writing then dispelling it with a wise-crack. In less skilled hands it could become tiresome. As usual there are some interesting ideas and some good storytelling. Take this concept of time:

> The living often don't appreciate how complicated the world looks when you are dead, because while death frees the mind from the straitjacket of three dimensions it also cuts it away from Time, which is another dimension. So while the cat that rubbed up against his invisible legs was undoubtedly the same cat that he had seen a few minutes before, it was also quite clearly a tiny kitten and a fat, half-blind old moggy and every stage in between. All at once.

The cover blurb has it about right when it says "he is to fatasy what Douglas Adams is to science fiction". This is an amusing, undemanding book. My one quibble must be - how many more Discworld books will there be? Could it be time for something completely different?

CITADOR - Michael Spelzini
[Dickens Publishing Co Ltd, 50 Great Russell Street, London WC1B 3BA, 1985, 31pp, £2.00]
Reviewed by Chris Barker

CITADOR IS A COLLECTION OF POETRY with elements of science, SF and fantasy. For this alone we can welcome it, as most poetry doesn't normally major in these themes. The areas of science which reoccur frequently can be divided into two categories: the nature of man, his origins and fate, and the moral dilemma he faces - or doesn't! - as in 'The First of Mankind', 'The Last of Mankind' and 'DNA Interplay'; and an area which you might title 'cosmological'. It is this latter which is the basis of the science-fictional/fantasy poems, eg. 'Citador' and 'Retirement 2050'. Spelzini also uses normal and fantasy landscapes as metaphors, eg. 'Between the Sand and the Sea' and 'Black Hole Drifter' - for me one of the best pieces in the collection. The poems are not always successful, but at their best they do both leave you with a "sense of wonder" and challenge some of our assumptions about the world and the human race and these are two important goals of mainstream SF.

BRIGHTNESS FALLS FROM THE AIR - James Tiptree Jr
[Sphere, 1986, 334pp, £3.50]
Reviewed by Paul Kincaid

OH I REMEMBER THOSE HEADY DAYS WHEN the first stories by James Tiptree caused such a stir. But her first novel, *Up the Walls of the World* (1978), failed to match the intensity or the sheer humanity of the short fiction. Now the second novel has appeared, and anyone who hoped that Tiptree might have come to master the long form as she has done the short is in for a bitter disappointment.

We are in catastrophe land, a disparate cast brought together on a distant planet to watch the aura of a nova pass by. During the course of a day and a night some of these are revealed to be criminals intent upon inflicting the utmost cruelty on the innocent natives. Others are to become heroes, or revealed as part of the villainy that caused the nova and destroyed an alien civilization. Still another, in a moment of high silliness that it astounds me Tiptree could ever consider, pulls off his human mask to reveal himself as totally unhuman. And just like one of those dreadfully predictable disaster movies, a certain amount of time is spent gathering the characters together, providing brief thumbnail sketches of each, and setting up the situation. Then, when things begin to happen, they continue with a monotonous relentlessness that provides a new twist whenever the pace shows any sign of varying. And the twists are all either mind-numbingly obvious, or else increasingly daft. For all her undoubted abilities as a writer, Tiptree clearly has no grasp of the elementals of plot and pace.

That said, Tiptree is incapable of producing a book that is entirely bad. The Damei, for instance, are a creation that is vintage Tiptree; a delicate examination of an ahuman social and

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sexual organisation. And there is the wonderful idea of the time flurries that occur as the various nova fronts pass, allowing alterations to the immediate past. This is good, but the inventiveness and talent that these features betray are used merely as decorative curlicues on a tediously unadventurous tale that is far far below what Tiptree is capable of.

REPARATIONS - Gordon Wardman
[Secker & Warburg, 1987, 196pp, £9.95]
Reviewed by Martyn Taylor

"AS SOON AS THIS PUB CLO-OSES" GOES the song, "the Revolution starts!" epitomising the greater concern of the radical Left in Britain with (endlessly) arguing ideological purity than putting bullets through Fascist heads.

Maybe. Gordon Wardman draws a 1999 in which Thatcher has been succeeded by Tebbit and Tebbit by ... The North-South divide is fixed by barbed wire. The boys have stopped practising in Ulster and come home to keep us in order. Into this world returns Hank Gilbey, old time apparatchik in search of ILP gold, and grand-daughter Leanne, hitwoman for the Fourth World Liberation Front. Except neither Hank nor Leanne ever hefted a weapon in anger.

Put baldly this is the story of Hank discovering revolutionary violence after a lifetime of verbals, except that violence is utterly personal, directed at those who would kill the flesh of his flesh. It may be a modern world but Hank's ideas stem straight from that noncomformist ethic which still moulds the Left in Britain.

> Solidarity is indivisible ... loyalty a seamless garment. If a man's going to be loyal, he's got to be loyal to his family, his friends, his Party, his class ... But the thing is it has to be in that fucking order.

It is solidarity which ultimately redeems and saves him. "A" may be for "Alienation", but not from yer ain folk.

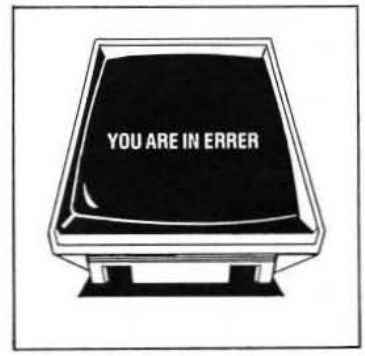
As you might expect,given the rough-hewn Northern hero and setting, this is a harsh but humourous story of Colin Welland brand "grit". Which is the weakness of the book, because Wardman has followed Welland in writing a film script. Everything is either action or dialogue, with precious little inwardness which is the written word's strongest suit. There is too little description or scene setting. I can see it all because this is my country, my people, but a Hampshire man might struggle. As for a New Hampshire man ... It would make a fine film too. The dramatic structure is well founded and paced, the characters vivid and real. As a novel, though, it is flawed.

That said, I enjoyed the book, although the Fascist Beast State is hardly omnipresent in the manner of its oppressiveness and Hank and Leanne can travel suspiciously easily. Not all squaddies are idiots, Mr Wardman, and not every secret policeman a clown. Yes, an interesting - in all senses of the word - book, well worth reading and having nothing whatsoever to do with Science Fiction, however defined.

HUYSMAN'S PETS - Kate Wilhelm
[Gollancz, 1986, 247pp, £9.95]
Reviewed by Tom Jones

THERE WAS THIS STRANGE, NOBEL PRIZE winning scientist, Dr Huysman, whose experiments may have produced a race of superior beings, most of whom are confined in a home for the mentally disturbed. Since Huysman's death his assistant (playing the evil scientist) wishes to use these people, most of them children, for military purposes.

Enter Drew Lancaster who, whilst trying to decide if he wants to write Huysman's biography, stumbles on Huysman's 'pets'. Assisted by assorted women, 'pets' who have avoided the home, a counterfeiter and his assistant, and some unwitting secret service agents, Drew saves the day.



Does this sound old fashioned and terrible? It isn't. The characters are fleshed out to a depth appropriate to their rôle within the story. To call Drew a hero is wrong, he's more a catalyst, the heroic acts tend to come from the women or 'pets'.

There are many possibilities for cliché and melodrama and Ms Wilhelm skates very close to some of them, but sidesteps in the nick of time. The result is that you could say everything goes too well for the good guys. With much of today's literature we're not used to that but it's still a valid outcome. Having said that, we are left with the thought that if the 'pets' are superior to us perhaps we didn't win.

Causality is an important part of the book. Some people certainly seem to be unknowingly manipulated into a position to help the 'pets'. Drew speculates on just how long this has been going on. Where the manipulation is recent perhaps the 'pets' are responsible, but if the 'pets' are also responsible in the long term then they've been planning for many years, which implies an ability for long-term prediction, which in its turn calls into question self determination. Or some other force/entity is involved, or it's a coincidence. Interesting.

The style is straightforward, precise, even sparse at times but without the stiltedness this sometimes generates. The style matches the story. This is a good SF mystery, I enjoyed it, thank you Kate Wilhelm.

SPIDER WORLD: THE TOWER - Colin Wilson
[Grafton, 1987, 398pp, £10.95]
Reviewed by Paul McAuley

THE FIRST PART OF A SCIENCE FANTASY 'saga' by a writer known more for his interest in pop-philosophy and the occult than SF, this book pleasantly surprised me - the first half, anyway. It's set in a future where insects, scorpions and spiders have grown monstrously large, and the world is ruled by intelligent 'death-spiders'. Humans are either slaves and spider-fodder, or struggle in primitive groups in the desert, hiding from patrolling spider balloons. The hero, Niall, is the child of one such family, possessed of telepathic powers, and his growth to adolescence in the desert is well handled: Wilson has done a lot of research on deserts and insects, and his descriptions of life in the arid landscape are simple, lucid and realistic.

What of the plot? Briefly, Niall kills a death spider, an unprecedented act which leads to the capture of his family and their transport to the spiders' citadel, cobwebbed ruins with a mysterious tower in its centre. The city and its slave society (there are also intelligent beetles with their own servants) are well described, but thereafter Wilson rather loses his way. Niall's telepathic power threatens the spiders' domination and he must escape or be killed; in a way not clearly explained he finds himself inside the tower where a friendly computer delivers an enormous expository lump and gives Niall a "thought mirror", telling him that it:

> was perfected by an ancient civilisation called Aztecs; their shamans used it in meditation before performing a human sacrifice. The secret was rediscovered by paranormal researchers in the late twentieth century. It has the power to coordinate mental vibrations from the brain, the heart and the solar plexus.

Er, quite. This mysticism takes up more and more of the book, although perhaps Wilson doesn't wholly believe in it: the spiders are at last beaten back by Niall and some of the beetles' servants (including an unbelievably anachronistic Cheerful Cockney) with superweapons from an ancient armoury.

The novel succeeds where it only describes landscape and action without too much explanation; the lumps of exposition and mysticism add little and will strike the average SF reader as full of old-fashioned notions. Still, at the end it is hinted that Niall must return to the desert to continue his struggle, so I will keep half an eye out for the next in the series.