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EDITORIAL ADDRESS: David V Barrett, 23 Oakfield Road, Croydon, Surrey CR0 2UD Tel: 01-688 6081

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— THE BRITISH SCIENCE FICTION ASSOCIATION LTD —

EDITORIAL

DAVID V BARRETT

I FIND IT VERY DIFFICULT TO WRITE SHORT STORIES. I'VE written two in the last 12 months, and they were the first for a few years. A novel, though the end may seem out of sight, indeed, may never arrive, is something I can get my teeth into, explore, find out what's going on as it happens. A novel, I think, develops during the writing: a short story is born fully grown. Imagine Clarke sitting down to write "The Nine Billion Names of God", or Asimov "Nightfall", or Heinlein "By his Bootstraps", without their knowing the outcome at the outset.

Garry Kilworth's article in *V135* and your response to it, coupled with a number of other things I've read and written recently, have caused me to think out my attitude to the short story a little more. I'm primarily a novel person (no wisecracks, please!) both in what I prefer and am able to write, and also in what I prefer to read.

Why? There are two main sets of reasons: utilitarian and aesthetic. The first is very simple. I do much of my reading these days on commuter trains or in other short pockets of time. With a novel, I can put it down, pick it up the next day, and it's big enough to maintain its continuity despite the interruptions. A 10 or 20 page short story, broken half way through, loses much of its power.

Which leads me on to the other reason. I like to be drawn into the plot, to get involved, to get to know the characters, to be in it long enough to begin to *believe* it. Short stories, with few exceptions, don't allow this to happen. By the time I've got to know the main characters, it's all over. I'm not allowed to believe in them, so I end up treating them merely as clever constructions. (Novellas, a literary form almost peculiar to the SF genre, are even worse. I'm just beginning to get suckered in when the door slams.)

There is another reason as well. The majority of short stories just aren't very good. Either they're hackneyed ideas; or they're simply extended puns, depending on their last line to raise a laugh and/or groan; or their characterisation is non-existent because (and this is one of SF's greatest faults) the idea is all-important; or they're just badly written.

The majority. Not all, by any means -- but far too many. (I know many novels also suffer from some of these same faults; but with a novel you can read the blurb and the first few pages, you can assess the style and the writing quality, *you can get a feel for it* before you buy or borrow it, before you commit yourself to reading it. You just can't do that with individual short stories.)

And yet there are some short stories which rise far above the majority, which stay in the mind for years, some for their sheer cleverness, and some, rarely, because their magic takes hold of you, becomes a part of you, and never leaves you.

To turn from the general to the particular, I want to take a brief look at, and give something of the flavour of four quite different short story author-collections which have been published by Gollancz over the last nine months.

BURNING CHROME

WILLIAM GIBSON'S FIRST COLLECTION OF SHORTS IS VERY patchy -- which is not surprising if I remember correctly him telling me it contained *all* the stories he's done. There are some nicely drawn pieces. "Dogfight", for instance, written with Michael Swanwick, is a high tech moral tale with the message that cheatin' don't bring satisfaction: a well crafted story. The other two collaborations, though, are weak reworkings of hackneyed themes: "The Belonging Kind" (with John Shirley) is protagonist identifies alien, follows alien, becomes alien. "Red Star, Winter Orbit" (with Bruce Sterling, who, somewhat incestuously, also wrote the glowing Preface) has a Soviet space hero deciding to end his days on *Kosmograd* when economics and politics make the Russians close it down; but a promising end-of-the-space-dream human interest story is ruined by a clumsily tacked on ending.

Gibson's multi-award winning novel *Neuromancer* grew out of the title story of this collection. Computer hackers breaking through Ice -- Intrusion Countermeasures Electronics -- make a damn sight better short story than a novel: fast moving, exciting, with an interwoven love story -- and tightly written and *understandable*. The other gem in the collection is "The Winter Market": the old idea of commercially available "dreams", but told chillingly to show the psychological effects of the creation of a work of genius on the "writer" and editor.

But maybe Gibson has now gone as far as he can with cyberpunk. It was an interesting experiment, but cyberpunk, to me, is little more than 60s New Wave updated to the 80s, with a large measure of 40s B movies voice-over slung in for the "gutter reality". It's clever, it's flashy, it's technologically *fast* -- but it fails for me on two major counts: is says very little that's new about the human condition, largely because it relies far too heavily for its punch on technogadgetry; and I simply don't believe in it. Gibson's world is a clever construct, but it takes more than dustbins and dogturds to make back-alleys real.

And there's no doubt at all that he should have waited another couple of years before bringing out this collection. *Every* writer produces some turkeys; most don't see the light of day; some of them slip into the magazines. But there's no excuse for putting them between hard covers.

EVIL WATER

I WAS VERY PLEASANTLY SURPRISED BY IAN WATSON'S FOURTH short story collection. From previous experience, mainly of his novels, I'd expected to be using the adjective "cerebral" here. I've always thought Watson tried too hard to make his novels *deeply meaningful*, in the process drastically reducing their readability. But *Evil Water* is an intensely readable and enjoyable collection.

The title story is more supernatural horror than SF: a disturbing tale of a respectable and married young man who is captivated and seduced by a teenage girl. But Sally tells him a tale from some generations back:

> "Witches weren't burnt in this country... They had a bright idea. Boiled me alive in a cauldron. Till I scalded to death. Till the flesh floated off me bones. Then they fed the stew to the hogs... That was their mistake. When they ate those hogs, they ate me. So I come back. An I keeps comin' back."

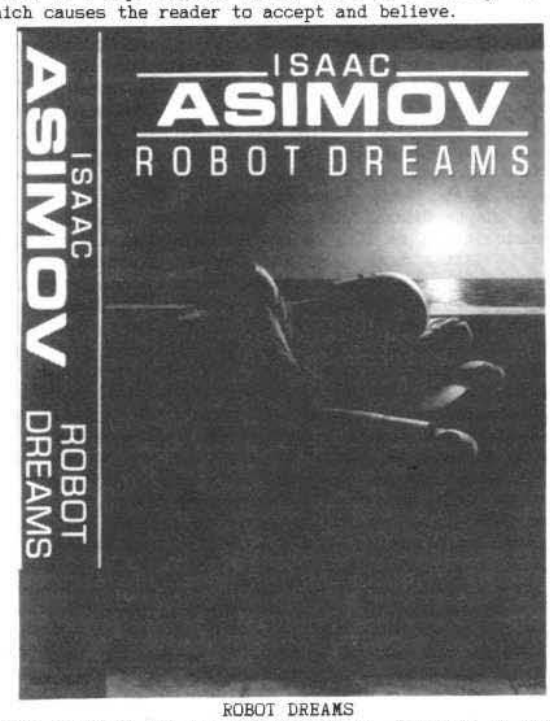
Sex, religion, death, the belief that ancient life and spirit live on in water; but water is everywhere: in raindrops, in pools, out of a tap, in sewers, in a baptismal font, in the bladder, the blood, and the cells of the human body...

"Cold Light" also demonstrates Watson's continuing interest in the myriad oddities of religion. When the Bishop of Porchester, who is obsessed with the history of lighting, simultaneously goes blind and grows a halo, he knows damn well it's not because of his saintliness. The inventiveness of the solution is echoed throughout the collection. "The Wire around the War" posits a strange, and disturbingly both rational and arational solution to the nuclear threat. "The People on the Precipice" turns our normal living space through 90°, with an entire migrant tribe living its life on the vertical face of a cliff; it can be seen either as simply an economic and political allegory of the struggle for survival on limited resources, or, at a deeper level, as a tale of the determination and perseverance of a lone visionary, through his storytelling, to jog the perceptions of the dull masses into -- literally

EDITORIAL

-- a new dimension; "I'm asking you to imagine a different kind of world" -- and hence as an allegory of the rôle of all artists, and perhaps especially science fiction writers.

Writers are always being asked "Where do you get your ideas from?" In Watson's case, I suspect many of them come from the daily newspaper and magazines such as *New Scientist*: he reads a news story or article and says, "Now *there's* an idea." Or else he wakes up from a dream and (as perhaps we all ought to do) jots down the remnant images. But whether his stories are set in the present or the future, whether they are in a mundane world, a fantastical world, or a supernatural world, there is a reality in them which causes the reader to accept and believe.



ROBOT DREAMS

ISAAC ASIMOV'S LATEST COLLECTION IS, BLUNTLY, A CON. IT claims to be "a definitive collection of his best short fiction". True, it contains plenty of old favourites, including "Sally" (cars with positronic brains - and feelings), "Jokester" (jokes are an alien way of studying mankind; once we realise this, humour vanishes), "The Feeling of Power" (a guy rediscovers arithmetic without computers -- and it becomes the latest super-weapon), and others, largely from the fifties. It also has one new story, "Robot Dreams", and, according to the blurb, "several previously uncollected stories". This is gross misrepresentation: it has one, count it, *one* previously uncollected story, "True Love". A programmer gets his computer to search for his ideal woman. He feeds in everything he knows about himself: personality profile, likes and dislikes, childhood memories, and so on. The computer eventually finds the woman and true love -- and guess how the story ends (yawn). There must be a dozen different versions of this tale around by assorted writers.

The title story, the only new one, is a good example of a typical Susan Calvin story. Nuff said.

The saving grace of this book has nothing to do with short stories: the illustrations by Ralph McQuarrie show robots reclining, lying, sleeping, dreaming with a warmth and subtlety rare in SF art.

So you're being asked to pay £10.95 for some admittedly beautiful artwork (B&W except the cover), an average new story (5pp), a hackneyed story which should have remained uncollected (3½pp), and a load of antique Asimov stories most of which are readily available elsewhere.

John Sladek once wrote a marvellous parody entitled "Broot Force", as by Iclick as-i-move (collected in *The Steam-Driven Boy*, Panther, 1973). If you *must* read Asimov, you can save yourself a lot of time by reading instead this little gem, which far surpasses its original.

THE LORDLY ONES

WHEN I FIRST READ KEITH ROBERT'S 1979 COLLECTION *LADIES from Hell* I moved various bits of heaven and earth to get hold of a copy of the Gollancz hardback for myself. Some of its stories, particularly "The Ministry of Children" and "Our Lady of Desperation", spoke to me more than almost any other short story had ever done. *The Lordly Ones* is of the same high standard.

Regular readers of *F&SF* will have come across many of the stories already. The title story and "The Comfort Station" are about the toilet attendant who is, shall we say, slow; after the balloon goes up he still tends to his unfrequented Gents (and the Ladies, after some qualms) with loving devotion. In "Ariadne Potts" a boring little bank clerk is transformed when the statue of a nymph comes to life and moves in with him -- but is change always for the better? -- and is success good for the soul? "Sphairistike" will be a delight for Wimbledon fans, as the narrator follows the career of Sarah Foster, the Girl from Dorset, through to the Finals -- but there are several stings in this tale. "The Checkout" is, amazingly, the first *Anita* story I've read (anyone with an unwanted copy of *Anita*, please let me know). Anita is a witch, but by no means an old hag; in fact she is young, and pretty, and bang up to date -- and actually very much like Kaeti: an archetypal Keith Roberts creation.

There's nothing twee about these stories; they are incredibly powerful. I found I could only read one a day, the emotional impact of each one was so overwhelming. But despite the current Keith Roberts revival, of which I heartily approve so long as the guy doesn't drown in flattery, I would guess that *The Lordly Ones* will be the only one of these four books not to appear in paperback.I'd like to be proven wrong -- but I'd recommend ordering this one from the library, or even buying yourself the hardback as an early Christmas present.

ART AND ENCOURAGEMENT

FOUR TOTALLY DIFFERENT WRITERS, AND FOUR TOTALLY different collections of short stories. Each writer has a distinctive voice; there's no way any of these stories could accidentally have been transplanted into one of the other collections.

I've not attempted to hide my own preferences and prejudices; they are no more nor less valid than anyone else's. What I have tried to do is to give a flavour of each book and an impression of the style of each writer and the quality of his work.

One is largely hack work from a grossly over-rated writer who should have packed it in a quarter century ago. Another is flashy but, with a couple of exceptions, fairly empty. One is intensely human, the protagonists being normal people with very real emotions, desires, strengths of character, and failings. And one is -- well, in many ways, the truest successor of the Golden Age of the short story: whatiffery *par exellence*.

Whatever their individual merit, full marks to Gollancz for having the guts to publish four author-collections of short stories at a time when too many people are too willing to say the short story is dead. Far from it. Particularly in the hands of British writers, the short story has a lot going for it.

A lot more, in fact, than I've been prepared to admit in the last few years. My reservations at the start still stand: in brief, I still, for the most part, prefer to read novels than short stories; and the majority of short stories I still believe can be slung in the bin with no great loss. But a really well-crafted short story that reaches into the guts and won't let go -- that's art, and I admire it and the people who can do it.

And encouraged by their example, I might even try to write more short stories myself.

LETTERS

«ONLY A FEW LETTERS THIS TIME, WHICH IS DISAPPOINTING after the last few issues, though part of the reason may be that I'm having to put them together earlier than usual so they can be typed up by our production assistants. Usually I do them and the editorial myself, but some unkind soul broke into my flat at the beginning of April and stole, as well as my entire stereo outfit and sundry other things, my Amstrad wordprocessor and all my working discs containing all my personal and business correspondence, articles, freelance work and Vector material of the last 18 months. What was on the discs is irreplaceable, but I hope to be wordprocessing again in the next month or so.

If all goes according to plan, the next two issues of Vector should focus on Feminism & SF, and children's SF. I've had tentative offers of articles for a possible Religion & SF issue as well. But please don't let all these special issues put you off writing articles on any other SF-related subject for Vector; it's your journal, and we need your articles.

Finally, an appeal to those of an artistic bent: if you'd like to see your artwork gracing the pages of Vector, please send it to me.

Now to your letters. First, an apology: ER James wrote to say that he is not Edward James, editor of Foundation, as I mistakenly said. Edward James writes:»

I WAS INTERESTED TO READ IN YOUR LETTERS *V137* THAT ER James, editor of *Foundation* congratulated you on a "spendid issue." No, he didn't, though he should have done, and you can take my word for it (as editor of *Foundation*). Could it possibly have been ER James, author of SF stories in, for example, *New Worlds 4, 14, 17, 18, 21, 23, 25, 26, 29* etc., etc. right up to *New Worlds 135*? I well remember the days when I was dying for someone to mistake me for ER James, but alas it never happened.....

EDWARD JAMES

«Sorry for the comparison..... Perhaps ER James would tell me whether I finally granted Edward James' early wish.....»

I FEEL THAT MIKE DICKINSON COMPLETELY MISSED THE POINT of Streiber and Kunetka's book, *Natures End* in his review in *V136* -- a point which is inherent in its title. I agree that the politics are abhorrent, but the explicit message of what we are doing to ourselves and the earth is even more abhorrent, yet Mike barely mentions this in his review. I spent several weeks trying to trace a copy of the book just to check if he and I had actually read the same thing. It took a lot to believe that a book which made such a great impression on me, should make a barely negligible impression on someone else.

If you can read the descriptions of the burning of the rainforests of Brazil, the deadly smog that enveloped Denver without being moved, without pausing to think how close we are moving to such events, then you are not, I fear, a complete human being. The inclusion of the data-file material, some of it dating from our own time, only serve to show that this chain of destruction begins *now*. By 2021, the date at which the events described in the book take place, it may already be too late.

To dismiss this book as "insolently irrelevant" is dangerously short-sighted. After all, until the day when we do reach the stars, this planet is the only home we have. Please, read this book. If you find the politics distasteful, so are the politics of apathy and pandering to the view that future generations will find some cure for the ecological ills that will be our main legacy to them.

JO RAINE
33 Thornville Road
Hartlepool
Cleveland TS26 8EW

YOUR EDITORIAL IN *V136* IS REALLY EXCELLENT, MY FAVOURITE piece in that issue (now how long did it take you to write that?). Maybe it struck me as particularly good because I've just spent today (a vacation day off from work) not-writing, and it's made me miserable. After reading your editorial, and after this day spent not-writing, I'm inclined to think that writing is an awful lot like exercising, only done with the mind not the body. All perspiration and discipline. This analogy also gives me the insight that it may be easier to do a little each day rather than try to do it all at once (like today). I'm also not at all convinced that it must be boring (I don't believe you wrote that, but quoted someone who did), at least not if you can "project" yourself into your writing, and lose most conscious thought of the outside world. When writing goes well, I find it an integrating force in my life, somehow pulling together all the fragmenting bits that are me, maybe only because I'm putting my thoughts on paper. Perhaps I even think best on paper!

I'm surprised Garry Kilworth didn't examine the theory that short stories actually take more skill to write successfully than novels. George Turner advanced this theory; he suggested that because of the brevity of the form, a short story must use far fewer words to explain character, background and theme. There is less room for mistakes. In other words, a good short story might require as much background thinking as a novel.

L E T T E R S

Considering the extra problems that arise in science fiction (if you take extrapolation and scientific content at all seriously), it's a wonder any decent short SF gets written at all.

I do think readers are more willing to put up with radical experiments in short stories than in novels simply because short stories are brief. If the experiment fails, so it goes.

In *V137*, I'm amazed to read Andy Sawyer's article about *The Voyage of the Space Beagle*. I'm amazed because Lucy Sussex wrote about the same book in the November *Australian SF Review*, comparing the original stories to the later novel fix-up (indeed, her article is called "The Examination of a Fix-Up"). Why all this attention on a book that both critics are only lukewarm about? Has the book just been recently re-released in the UK/Australia, or are great minds just thinking alike?

Paul Kincaid ends his guest editorial (*V137*) with a question that begs for an article ("What is the optimum proportion of science to fiction?"), or maybe a book. Actually, his question is at the heart of anything that tries to be science fiction criticism, as opposed to just literary criticism. I don't have any answers either.

CY CHAUVIN
14248 Wilfred
Detroit
MI 48213
USA

«You're right, it did take a lot of time and effort, but I'm glad you think it was worth it. It was a couple of articles I did at work that were boring to write; that happens sometimes. I don't know how seriously Frank Muir meant it -- but bread & butter commissioned writing, like any other job, must have its boring moments. You're right about "a little each day"; like exercise, if you get out of practice and out of the habit, it can be hell getting back into it. On "decent short SF": take a look at this issue's editorial. And Cy -- would you like to write the article you suggest?»

JIM ENGLAND WAS QUITE RIGHT TO ATTACK MY ARTICLE IN *V136*, if he disagreed with the content, but his personal attack on me requires an answer. The "bar-room brawl" etc, which he states says a lot about Garry Kilworth, was of course an hyperbole and was qualified by a sentence in brackets which I hoped everyone would recognise as irony. Obviously Jim England took them both at face value, but I'll tell him now, I do not like *gratuitously* unpleasant stories. "Gut-twisting" was intended to be a stronger phrase than "sit up and pay attention" -- nothing more. Finally, the "hard work" I referred to was a long-term labour in relation to the development of ideas, not the mechanics of drafting stories. I am as strong an advocate of intuitive writing and trusting my subconscious, as he appears to be.

GARRY KILWORTH
Witchwater
The Chase
Ashingdon
Essex SS4 3JE

THE INTERVIEW WITH GUY GAVRIEL KAY IN *V137* WAS interesting. I would have liked more detail/insight on his work with *The Simarillion* but no doubt he would have liked to discuss his own work more so perhaps the right balance was struck.

I'd like to take up a point in your review of Aldiss' and Wingrove's *Trillion Year Spree* -- your comment about their treatment of recent British writers is perhaps a little parochial. I'm not saying anything about the writers you mention, I accept they are writers of quality, but within the context of the larger SF field they are not (currently) leaders or pace setters. Whether we like it or not America is the focus of English-written SF and it is within that arena writers have to make their mark (big lake against little pond). Perhaps the question to ask is why some good British writers don't seem to be able to make it in this larger context. I accept that there are differences in taste but I think the elements of good writing are sufficiently universal for this not to be a sufficient reason.

TOM JONES
14 Haywood
Haversham Park
Bracknell
Berkshire RG12 4WG

«Rightly or wrongly, I still believe that much of recent British SF is of a higher standard, and stylistically more advanced, than much of US SF. Which is why I think Aldiss and Wingrove should have given it a little more attention than they did.»

I FIND JOY HIBBERT'S DESCRIPTION OF ALGERNON AS "THICK" tasteless and, if she is serious, indicative of a total lack on her part of any feeling for language, not to mention an inability to distinguish between (a) a finely drawn character whose mental state is portrayed so that we can really empathise with it, and (b) in *The Forever Man*, a character who is supposed to be a functioning all-American spaceship pilot and all-round hero, who demonstrates that his creator could not get his plot together without making him both cardboard and intellectually negligible to a degree that invalidated all belief in his actions, his status and his subsequent transmutation into an intellectual, moral, feeling *man*.

As for Joy's discovery that I "don't always read the *Vector* books" -- this puzzles me. If she really means that she's astonished I do not read the *books*, I plead guilty -- I can't afford hardcovers but I wasn't aware this was a crime in the SF area. If what she really means is that I don't always read *Vector reviews*, again I plead guilty for one very good reason: I may be asked to review the paperback version and do not want to be influenced by other people's thoughts. This often painful refusal to swot up in advance does, however, lead to my thoroughly enjoying many books which I might have ignored had I allowed reviews to turn me against them.

And yes, I am aware that I too attack many books, and that my own reviews may deter others -- it is, after all, the function of a reviewer to express his findings clearly, and I have yet to meet an infallible critic, have you? To me, the real pleasure comes from turning back to see what my many fannish friends have had to say about books *after* I've read them (or, sometimes, thrown them across the room in fury).

KEN LAKE
115 Markhouse Avenue
London E17 8AY

THE HITCH HIKERS GUIDE TO THE GALAXY HAS SEVERAL GREAT qualities; the aspect I dislike about it is not the fault of the book but of its fans. Particularly the ZZ9 fan club and such who certainly seem to believe that SF humour began with Douglas Adams (some also think it ended with him). This neglects the prime influences of *HHGTTH*, Sheckley (*Dimension of Miracles*), and Kuttner (*The Proud Robot*) as well as other very funny writers such as Terry Pratchett, Piers Anthony (until he let the pun take over) and similarly, Robert Asprin. Bob Shaw has written light-hearted pieces that match his most serious work.

Adams is not the best or only, but one of many excellent humorous SF authors.

On trilogies Bob Shaw has said that *The Ragged Astronauts* is to be a trilogy because (a) it would be too long, and (b) he needs to pay the rent meanwhile. Two valid fair reasons to make a large concept a trilogy.

LETTERS

In one of his collections, Harlan Ellison relates of a prank when he swapped his award (a Hugo I think) at a dinner with Ursula LeGuin's novel award. A witness made a big fuss over his being "only a short story award", whereas LeGuin took the joke as intended.

I try to write short stories, or I write short stories, I try to do good ones. Right now, I could not complete a novel though I have 12,000 words in a file somewhere. I suspect if I go to a publisher with 20 short stories saying, "Would you like to put out a collection of these?" I will not get far even if my work were good. Few writers can get away with just short stories. Ellison does, but even his earliest work was in longer form. *Web of the City* (originally *Rumble*) was his first book, since when he has published just two other novels, *Doomsman* and *Spider Kiss*.

Bradbury is another; he several times pushed stories together to make a collection be an almost-novel. At least Garry Kilworth is attracting attention to the short story again.

KEV McVEIGH
39 Coundon Road
Coventry CU1 4AR

«Spider Kiss was originally published as Rockabilly. *Ellison also co-wrote* Phoenix Without Ashes, *a novelisation of his fated TV series* The Starlost, *with Edward Bryant.»*

THE GHOST IN THE PEN RAISED SOME QUESTIONS. "SCHISM"' IS defined in my somewhat lacking dictionary as religious divisions, but I take it to mean divisions *in general*, too, divisions in society.

But though society is beginning to show widening cracks between "classes" or "groups", I think Michael Cobley is making too much of "schisms" within science fiction or fantasy. To a certain extent, SF deals with *today's* problems and it is inevitable that social and other real-life divisions are reflected in it. And I don't believe we shouldn't expect imaginative explanations in fantasy because of these "schisms". A good writer learns to use all the tools of his craft -- or at least attempts to, a competent writer will only use certain tools in order to bring out the same product again and again -- the difference, perhaps, between a skilled and creative carpenter and a factory line worker producing identical, plain-looking tables. The factory line worker does not produce plain-looking tables because of schisms that prevent him from considering custom-made quality work. He produces plain-looking tables because it's quicker, easier, cheaper and more profitable, and perhaps because he lacks the talent to do anything more ambitious even if he *tried* to be more ambitious -- likewise many writers. I really don't think "schisms" is anywhere near being a complete answer, though political/philosophical *concerns* are always self-limiting -- but should *this* be seen as such a dreadful thing? Diversification with concerns in SF is surely a *good* thing?

Philosophy is not about consciously following in someone else's footsteps or elevating philosphers to exalted levels as if they are the first and only ones to have had those thoughts. So of course you're not likely to read about Hegel, Marx, Hume and Popper in fiction. Philosphy is *personal* -- you share a philosphy by coincidence/influence, not by reading up on Marx and saying, "Yeh, I'll go along with that." (If you do unquestioningly, you lack imagination). These people commented on philosphy, they didn't invent it.

Why does there have to be interaction with the "outside" world? I know we could "move the world" by being heard on a loud enough scale, but "outside" suggests "not interested in *us*/the opposing side" which is, in itself, divisioning into sides. If we all thought the head-on frontal attack on the "outer" world succeeded in the long term, we'd get into politics and start wars. As it is, any politically conscious writers and fans amongst us probably feel that working in these small ways is more likely to encourage a better future. The conclusion "an SF literature can make us think about possibilities and thus learn more about ourselves" is known to most SF fans, isn't it?

The final impression I get from Michael's article is that he is obsessed with the idea of "schisms", to a point that blinds him to seeking more obvious, alternative explanations for differing fantasy patterns and to a point where he feels fandom is somehow a tangible unity which can rise up and bring about sudden social change. Politics seeks to do that and fails. Religion does sometimes do it, but to frightening effect (take the present movement in the USA) but then politics and religion can be seen as schisms, too.

TERRY BROOKE
230 Hykeham Road
Lincoln LN6 8AR

«We also heard from Ray Smith of Barnsley, with further thoughts on the ragthorn (see V135 *and* V136. *Keep the letters rolling in -- and if you can, please type them: it will save my eyes going squiff at 3 in the morning!»*

FORGOTTEN FRUIT

David Knott

Blame it on my engineering training if you like, but I have a fascination for the ways in which scientific principles can be exploited, which usually exceeds my interest in the principles themselves. Similarly, when I read science fiction, I am usually more interested in the way an author uses his scientific postulations than in the actual ideas. And I am always concerned about waste: just as an engineer should never squander raw materials, so the SF writer should make the best possible use of the medium within the bounds of his story. Looking at science fiction from this angle lends an unusual perspective, and it also reveals some unexpected differences between SF and "mainstream" fiction.

The nature of science fiction has largely been determined by the works of one man; Jules Verne. In his novels he established a formula for SF which still dominates the genre to this day. Verne was so uncannily accurate in his speculations on future inventions that he is regarded by many as a visionary; yet the major purpose of the scientific element of his writing was to lend conviction to his stories.

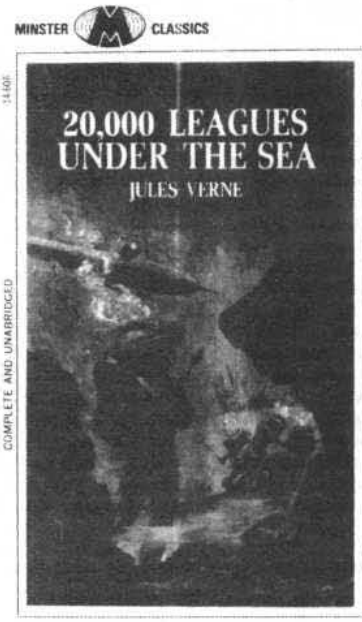
Verne was writing at a time when science was first being put to use on a grand scale. Engineering was seen by some as the key to a prosperous future, while others saw it as a threat to their way of life. Using scientific evidence to back up an argument carried greater persuasive power than ever before, and Verne realised that an accumulation of scientific details could both convince readers of the veracity of his stories and prepare them for his conjectures (which they would then find easier to accept).

Consider this passage from *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*, in which Verne is revealing the destructive powers of the so far unidentified Nautilus:

> After putting her in the drydock, engineers inspected the Scotia. They could not believe their eyes. Eight feet below her waterline there was a neat hole in the form of an isosceles triangle. It was so perfectly shaped that it could scarcely have been done better with a precision instrument. The object which had made this hole must have been extremely unusual -- and after being driven into the ship with prodigious force, enough to pierce a hull 1½ inches thick, it must have withdrawn by itself in a manner completely unexplainable.

Just the use of the word "isosceles" is enough to reveal Verne's belief in the power of scientific language to convince. It doesn't really matter to the reader what sort of triangle it is, but this adjective lends the authority of a technical report. And later in the story, when Verne describes the fabulous submarine which has caused the damage, the reader does not recoil in disbelief; he accepts this imaginative invention because he has learned to trust the author's scientific expertise, largely because of such attention to detail.

Verne's way was to lay the foundations for his stories in established scientific knowledge, and then lead into speculations, while still adhering to the law of science. Yet the fiction was the dominant partner in his science fiction -- he wrote whithin the traditional rules of mainstream literature, weaving his science into conventional novelistic forms.



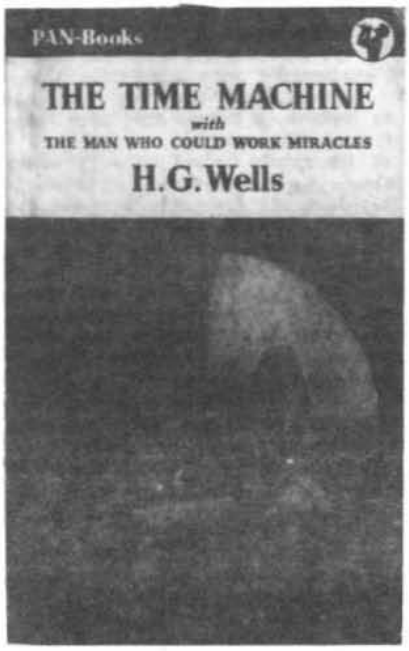
Contemporary thought was much used by HG Wells too, in his SF writing, but he took his speculations one step further than Verne. Rather than predict future inventions, Wells used science as a springboard to speculations on the future of mankind. But like Verne, he prepared the ground painstakingly before he made his leaps into conjecture, as this extract from *The Time Machine* shows:

> "Scientific people," proceeded the Time Traveller, after the pause required for the proper assimilation of this, "know very well that Time is only a popular scientific diagram, a weather record. This line I trace with my finger shows the movement of the barometer. Yesterday it was so high, yesterday night it fell, then this morning it rose again, and so gently upward to here. Surely the mercury did not trace this line in any of the dimensions of Space generally recognised? But certainly it traced such a line, and that line, therefore, we must conclude was along the Time-Dimension."

Unlike Verne, however, Wells was unsound in some of his scientific thought, as this passage demonstrates. Whilst totally convincing to the technically illiterate, any science student would argue that the mercury traces a line in both space and time, with the space dimension being perfectly obvious -- up and down.

It is almost as if Wells rushed through this passage in his eagerness to get on to more interesting theorising on the future of the human race. His time traveller leaves the present -- and hard facts -- behind him with almost indecent haste:

> "I drew a breath, set my teeth, gripped the starting lever with both hands, and went off with a thud."



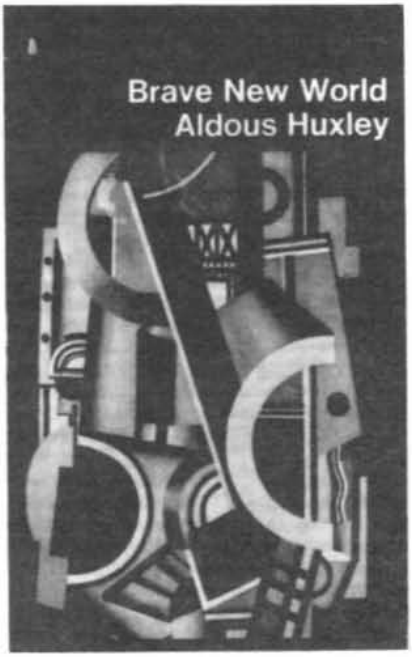
For Wells, science was useful as a means to a literary end, and he has the time traveller confess on his behalf towards the end of the story:

> "Consider I have been speculating upon the destinies of our race, until I have hatched this fiction."

Wells took a greater imaginative leap than Verne in that he did not limit his speculations to the area of science; and he was readier to let scientific accuracy fend for itself once he had taken the leap into conjecture.

It was not until the arrival of Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* that SF had its first major examination of the effects of scientific progress on human society. This novel was a warning against the dangers of developing Henry Ford's philosophy of mass production to a logical conclusion -- the mass production of human beings to fulfil predestined roles in society. In Huxley's dreadful future, morons are produced for the boring, repetitive jobs; intelligent people are created for management and research. In an eerie opening chapter, which describes a tour of new students around the Central London Hatchery and Conditioning Centre, the machine-like behaviour of the workers is detailed:

> Bent over their instruments, three hundred Fertilizers were plunged, as the Director of Hatcheries and Conditioning entered the room, in the scarcely breathing silence, the absent-minded soliloquizing hum or whistle, of absorbed concentration.



The workers even look identical: "Standard men and women; in uniform batches. The whole of a small factory staffed with the products of a single bokanovskified egg."

In his portrayal of machine-like humans, Huxley is out of step with the majority of later SF writers, who concentrate instead on human-like machines -- robots. And he was also out of step with the engineers of the day: they began to replace humans with machines, rather than make them more machine-like for integration into the production lines.

Where Huxley guesses wrongly at the next step in the process of mass production, Kurt Vonnegut, writing after this step has actually occurred, is able to make his first novel, *Player Piano*, a more probable picture of a chilling future. In many ways this book is the most successful I have read in predicting the true effects of science on society.

A third industrial revolution has completely replaced the lower orders of the work-force with machines, with only engineers and managers having any use or any say in the way society is run. The majority of people just have to pass the time as best they can. "By eliminating human error through machinery, and needless competition through organisation, we've raised the standard of living of the average man immensely," says a top manager.

But Vonnegut's protagonist, a rising star among the engineers and managers, sees beyond this statement to the emptiness and despair of the ordinary peoples' lives, and to the hollowness of the beliefs on which his life and work are based. As he says:

> "It's just a hell of a time to be alive, is all -- just this goddam messy business of people having to get used to new ideas. And people just don't, that's all. I wish this were a hundred years from now, with everybody used to the change."

In this book Vonnegut achieves several rare distinctions in his SF: his characters are three-dimensional; science is used as more than a springboard to fantasy -- it is a not too benevolent force affecting the lives of all the characters; and (best of all) some characters reveal the average man's reaction to the new, frightening technology -- mockery. Vonnegut is one of the few SF writers who doesn't accept science and technology as a Good Thing, without question.

Vonnegut also shows that technology can go ridiculously wrong. A draughts-playing computer is reduced by the hero to a smoking ruin during a game. A badly soldered contact is the cause of the breakdown, but the message is: "Those who live by electronics die by electronics."

But best of all is the humour, a rare quality in a genre which treats science with reverence:

> "...and there was old Mulcahy who got ahold of his card and doctored it with an icepick so the machines would think he was qualified for a big promotion but he got restricted to barracks for having clap twenty-six times and then transferred to the band as a trombone player when he couldn't even whistle 'Hot Cross Buns'..."

And Vonnegut provides at least one quotation which should be tattoed on every engineer's right arm: "It isn't knowledge that's making trouble, but the uses it's put to."

Another interesting aspect of *Player Piano* is its demonstration that a description of tomorrow's technology can soon look old-fashioned. Published in 1952, the book describes EPICAC XIV, the computer which runs that future society:

> "It's an electronic computing machine -- a brain, if you like. This chamber alone, the smallest of the thirty-one used, contains enough wire to reach from here to the moon four times. There are more vacuum tubes in the entire instrument than there were in the State of New York before World War II."

Six years later Jack Kilby and his colleagues built the first monolithic integrated circuit, and the era of the vacuum tube was over. A computer with the power of EPICAC XIV could probably now be housed in a garden shed.

Isaac Asimov's society on the planet Solaria in *The Naked Sun* is based on slavery, with robot rather than human slaves. It is one of the many examples of a fiction featuring a highly advanced technological society which paradoxically appears more feudal than modern.

Some of the robots are undistinguishable from humans to the uninformed observer, but Asimov's technical description of them is sparse. They are based around a positronic brain, he explains, and the details go little deeper. Not that Asimov is concerned with science here; rather he is constructing a web of facts through which he interweaves the pattern of a conventional detective story.

All the robots are built to obey the famous Three Laws of Robotics; but this uniformity seems rather unlikely when one looks at the chaotic structure of the "real-life" computer industry. Here one product has appeared in thousands of variations, with few attempts at standardisation. The Three Laws of Robotics could only exist where human nature has been stifled -- otherwise somebody would be bound to build a different, law-breaking robot in the pursuit of personal gain. If you're going to invent a human society, it must be defined by human characteristics, not by an author's whim, if it is to convince the reader. In *The Naked Sun* the society seems so arbitrary as to dispel all faith in the narrator, and hence to prevent the suspension of disbelief which is essential to the enjoyment of all good fiction.

Another flaw in this novel is inherent in the form of the detective story itself: obvious conclusions are revealed late in the book after contorted unfolding of the crime. Elijah Baley suddenly discovers that two robots working in unison can commit murder and yet still obey the three laws. Thus, a fact that would be apparent to any competent criminal takes seven-eighths of the book to make itself apparent to the master detective (who, just to make the plot even more convincing, was chosen among all others to solve the crime and thus safeguard the future of Earth!).

Now that we're in the realms of heroes who are faced with saving the world, it is appropriate to study Harry Harrison's *The Stainless Steel Rat*. While Asimov's character is the last person one would entrust with such a task, Harrison's super-hero charms the reader into believing he can do anything.

Harrison's exaggerated story works precisely because of his total disregard for the bounds of possibility, his humour, and his adherence to the basics of human motivation when developing his characters. Although the plot is absurd, the observations on human confrontation with technology have the ring of truth.

It is the hero's contempt for the superhuman technology that puts the reader on the side of the Stainless Steel Rat from the beginning:

> "You can't outmove a computer-robot combination, not when they move and react in microseconds -- but you can outthink them."

And as the story unfolds Harrison notes one symptom of a high-tech society which most other writers have totally ignored -- the attendant, flourishing bureaucracy:

> "Not a rivet fell, but that its fall was noted -- in quintuplicate. And later followed up with a memo, Rivet, Wastage, Query."

In many ways Harrison captures the human reaction to science and engineering more accurately than any deadly serious SF writer. High technology is used by his characters to improve on crimes that have been around for thousands of years; for example:

> "None of the robots looked up as I moved down the aisle -- I would have been surprised if they had. They were all low-grade M-types, short on brains and good only for simple, repetitive work. That was why I had hired them. They had no curiosity as to why they were taking the labels off the filled cans of azote fruits, or what was at the other end of the moving belt that brought the cans through the wall."

This observation is borne out by a recent article in *Computer Weekly* magazine, which revealed that most computer crimes involved simple alterations to input figures rather than any sophisticated use of the machine -- a modern version of fiddling the books.

However, while Harrison's understanding of human nature is sound, his instinct for engineering is more shaky. Consider this description of a boat's outboard motor:

> It was a tired looking atomic heat-exchanger, simple but efficient. No moving parts, it simply sucked in cold lake water, heated it to a boil and shot it out through an underwater jet.

A heat exchanger is simply a device for transferring heat from one fluid to another without the fluids coming into contact. It does not provide motive power. Also: what is the point of heating water to a boil and then shooting it away? If motion is required, cold water will do just as well.

This minor slip does not impair Harrison's novel to a significant degree; it illustrates again that science is not the most important factor in science fiction. Take the science out of *The Naked Sun* and you're left with an unconvincing detective novel; do the same to *The Stainless Steel Rat* and you're left with a successful entertainment in the James Bond tradition.

Perhaps the novel which most clearly brings into focus all aspects of the use of science in SF is Arthur C Clarke's *2010: Odyssey Two*. This was conceived by Clarke as an "exciting interstellar adventure that could actually happen and that doesn't defy the laws of physics."

The scientific skeleton of this book is marvellously put together. Of all science fiction novels, this must have the best-developed structure of fact and enlightened prediction. In this sense it is a direct descendant of the Verne tradition. Consider this passage, describing the surface of Io, one of the moons of Jupiter, as seen from an orbiting spaceship:

> Some of the sulphur lakes are hot enough to glow, but most of the light comes from electrical discharges. Every few minutes the whole landscape seems to explode, as if a giant photoflash has gone off above it. And that's probably

not a bad analogy; there are millions of amps flowing in the flux-tube linking Io and Jupiter, and every so often there's a breakdown. Then you get the biggest lightning flash in the Solar System, and half our circuit-breakers jump out in sympathy.

In *2010* the reader is treated to a detailed, educated evocation of a major part of the solar system. Clarke's representation is so thorough as to include a description of a film of sulphur dust which has blown on to the abandoned spaceship *Discovery* from Io. His command of the sort of facts which make the reader stop and think mark this as the work of a scholar:

> Astronomy was full of such intriguing but meaningless coincidences. The most famous was the fact that, from the Earth, both Sun and Moon have the same apparent diameter. Here at L.1 libration point, which Big Brother had chosen for its cosmic balancing act on the gravitational tightrope between Jupiter and Io, a similar phenomenon occurred. Planet and satellite appeared exactly the same size.

However, although the story of the planet and its satellites is followed through to a conclusion, the reader is left wanting to know more about the fate of the human cast, once the book had ended. For instance, the central character, Dr Heywood Floyd, is on the verge of a painful confrontation with his wife, who has decided that their marriage is over while he has been on the mission to Jupiter. Yet Clarke leaves him as he is about to go into hibernation for the journey back to Earth, and leaves unanswered questions in the reader's mind: did their relationship completely end; if so, did Floyd still think his mission worthwhile; who got custody of their son; even more importantly, who got custody of their pet dolphins?

It is as if Clarke was so absorbed with tying together the threads of the plot on the scientific level that the human element was pushed aside for later -- then forgotten. As if conscious of the need to have some kind of human interest rounding-off, he throws in decisions to marry between two pairs of cosmonauts. One pair hasn't even exchanged lingering glances throughout the whole book, yet they're suddenly prepared to march down the aisle together! Floyd's reaction to this news, which he receives as he is settling down for hibernation, is feeble to the point of being laughable:

> "Now I understand why you were spending so much time together. Yes, it is indeed a surprise... who would have thought it!"

This novel, more than any other in this brief study, demonstrates the dangers an author faces in trying to fob his readers off with a half thought-out "human-interest" story so that he can get back to the bits that interest him most -- the scientific conjectures. Just as every engineer must not only consider the ways in which he can exploit a scientific principle, but also the needs of the people who will use his invention, so the SF novelist must develop his characters with the same care as he advances his scientific postulations.

The problem that Clarke failed to overcome with *2010*, and which has made life difficult for every writer of science fiction, is that the work must obey the laws of conventional fiction as well as those of SF. Ignoring the human element of a story to concentrate on scientific concepts leads to a weakening of the work as a whole.

The relationship between the conventional author and the SF writer is like that between the pianist and the organist. The organist has dozens of foot pedals to deal with on top of two piano-style keyboards, while the SF writer must contend with the laws of physics as well as those of narrative; in comparison the pianist and the straight writer have a simple task. Is it any wonder that both the organist and the SF author can seem clumsy in the performance of their art, when compared with the pianist and the literary novelist respectively?

It may be said that the sample of books chosen as the basis of this article is not typical of the SF genre as a whole; and in one way at least this is true. Two of the books (those of Huxley and Vonnegut) challenge the value and the morality of scientific endeavour -- that is an unusual stance in a medium in which science is almost always accepted without question. When you consider how much our lives are dominated by science and technology, it is odd that these twin gods don't feature more often as a target for writers.

Social values, education, philosophy, religion and politics all have a large body of fiction carrying arguments for and against all of their numerous aspects; science has a literature which is mainly dominated by adventures in space. It's like having an orchard full of succulent fruit, and then picking only those fruits on the lowest, most easily-accessible branches. Among the forgotten fruits of science fiction there are enough unexplored themes to keep the writers going for ages, without having to re-work stale ideas; but the cost of harvesting will be more effort in both thought and craftsmanship.

While engineers have made great strides in the exploitation of scientific principles in the last hundred years or so, science fiction writers have been more careless with their raw material. They have used science successfully as a tool to lend conviction to a story, but they have hardly attempted to turn it in on itself, to examine its impact, its value, or its dangers.

For the reader, however, this could be a boon: at least we know that there could be so much more to come. And if we think SF is good so far, how much better will it be when the authors really have to think things through thoroughly before they begin a new novel?

An awesome weapon of the Old Reckoning - a Hoover 216

12 BEST SF NOVELS

KEN LAKE *examines the Gollancz Classic SF series and questions Malcolm Edwards about his selection criteria.*

"I select the Classic SF titles for quality -- and I seek to extend the appeal of SF beyond the hardcore readership, by providing as wide a range of quality books as I can."

Malcolm Edwards, SF editor of Gollancz, explains his philosophy in creating the new Gollancz Classic SF series of B-format paperbacks. But it is not quite as straightforward as this.

"You must realise that I can only use titles which are available to me. For example, I have been able to include Robert Silverberg's *A Time Of Changes* in the series, but most of his other books are almost constantly in print in mass paperback editions from other imprints, so I shall not be able to add them to the series."

Malcolm Edwards is a longtime SF fan and editor of one of Britain's all-time best fanzines, *Tappen* (which will repay re-reading by those able to recall its birth, and even more a first reading by newcomers to the fanzine scene), an author, and a full-time professional in the SF publishing field. Does he see himself as a fan who's managed to obtain an important position in publishing with a company that has always allied itself to the SF genre -- or as a professional who happens to enjoy fandom?

"I was the first. Now I am more the second. But I would not like to draw that distinction between the two," he admits. As both fan and pro, his selection of titles for the series is based on both sides of his SF persona -- and already the result is unique, the first dozen titles now on sale being:

1	Kurt Vonnegut	*The Sirens Of Titan*
2	Theodore Sturgeon	*More Than Human*
3	Robert Silverberg	*A Time Of Changes*
4	Samuel R Delany	*Nova*
5	Arthur C Clarke	*The City And The Stars*
6	Robert A Heinlein	*The Door Into Summer*
7	Frederik Pohl & CM Kornbluth	*Wolfbane*
8	John Sladek	*The Reproductive System*
9	Arthur C Clarke	*A Fall Of Moondust*
10	Bob Shaw	*A Wreath Of Stars*
11	Algis Budrys	*Rogue Moon*
12	Frederik Pohl	*Man Plus*

With two authors appearing twice already, and with three books by British authors to nine from the United States, some imbalance might seem apparent. But that ignores the fact that this is but the opening salvo of what we must hope will be a very long engagement. Eight more titles are to appear in 1987; after that the pace should slow down to somewhere between eight and twelve books a year.

Already there is plenty of variety -- in fact I would suggest that, expert opinions to the contrary, few fans would have selected all twelve of the titles now to hand, for they span a range from traditional to new wave, from humour and satire to straight SF plotting, from sociology to technology, and from imagined worlds that vary between the expectedly futuristic and the downright kooky.

Future developments depend, of course, on a continuing high level of sales, and as Malcolm Edwards has made his aim clear -- not only to appeal to convinced SF readers, but to attract newcomers -- he deserves our support in gaining those sales. I for one will often be seen in bookshops, leaning negligently against the Gollancz display and urging complete strangers to give them a try. But how well are they selling?

"It is too early to analyse sales patterns, but I can say that I am reasonably saitsfied with them."

Certainly their immediate appeal is one of quality, with first-class printing in legible type on fine paper with striking and intelligent cover art. But is that appearance just too up-market? Malcolm Edwards explains that Gollancz now has two strings to its paperback bow. "I visualise these books as the SF equivalent of King Penguins and Picadors. Remember that Gollancz has never been in the mass market for paperbacks, but has issued B-formats in the past, which made this a logical first step. But in May we are finally entering the mass market with a normal-format paperback SF series, and this gives me the opportunity to publish many titles which I did not visualise as falling into the Classic SF field."

What, then, are the criteria for the two formats?

"There are many fine books which I feel appeal mainly to the hardcore SF reader. Where such books are available to me, I aim to issue them in the mass market series -- an excellent example is Hal Clement's *Mission Of Gravity*, where the science is so important, but so complex, that it might deter the less experienced reader."

However, the Classic SF series already offers fans the chance to chuck out a dozen tatty old paperbacks of well-loved titles and replace them with this striking new series of high-quality productions. But will they all be novels?

"There will probably be some author collections too, although I don't have any in the first score of titles. What *will* appear soon, however, as number 16, is an

anthology -- and quite a surprising one too, I think." I couldn't guess, and was astonished when he revealed that the entire Harlan Ellison *Dangerous Visions* anthology, packed with short stories that have since become classics in their own right, will be produced as a single Gollancz Classic SF paperback. Visualising my own three-volume US edition, I can hardly wait to see it!

What precisely do we find on the already 18cm-long shelf of Classic SF titles? Certainly they are immediately distinguishable from the more traditional selection in the new Methuen series, and the unashamedly space-operatic scope of the Venture SF operation.

Vonnegut offers both humour and satire with immaculate writing, if a somewhat flippant approach to the folly of mistaking luck for the favour of God; some readers may find the Church of God the Utterly Indifferent somewhat hard to take, while the creation of a character to whom all moments of time appear coexistent is quirky enough to give even the most hardened SF reader cause for pause.

For all that, Vonnegut is a gripping writer, while Sturgeon -- noted in the forties for his creation of plots that seemed intent on shocking for their own sake -- seems remarkably muted in comparison. His fine "Baby Is Three" novelette from 1952 is here embedded between two less tautly written sections which frankly fail to hold the attention -- though the fix-up, which was first published in 1953, went on to win the International Fantasy Award.

Using nearly a score of pseudonyms, Silverberg virtually swamped the SF field between 1955 and 1975, yet this title stands alone for the strangeness of its invented ambiance, a civilisation in which the word "I" does not exist. With the sixties drug culture reflected in the means chosen to break down this stylised and decadent civilisation, the intelligent reader is alternately engrossed and intrigued -- but this is as nothing to the cryptic, convoluted and often wilfully confusing work by Delany. Contrasting high-flown rhetoric with slang and jargon, this provides us with anti-social characters whose bizarre moral standards nevertheless seem suited to their milieu.

By no means an easy book, albeit an important one, Delany's bears no comparison with the typical pellucid English style of Arthur C Clarke who, in the two works represented here, brings us back to traditional SF in its factual, scientifically-based form. *The City And The Stars* is recognised as "probably his most perfect work," and as "one of the strongest tales of conceptual breakthrough in genre SF," to quote Peter Nicholls' considered judgement in his *Encyclopaedia of Science Fiction*.

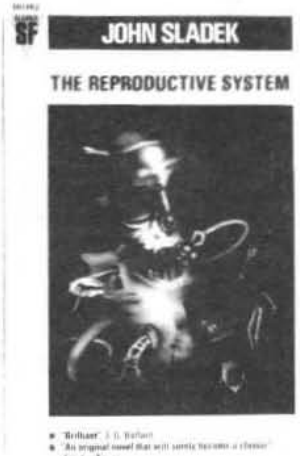
Nicholls gives only passing mention to *A Fall Of Moondust*, yet this realistic account of an accident on the Moon grips the reader still, despite Clarke's admission in his specially written introduction that the science behind the whole concept is probably quite untenable today. Heinlein's hardboiled Raymond Chandler writing is of quite a different quality, and in recent years has degenerated into a weak pastiche of flashbacks to his more creative works, among which this is but one of a long and illustrious line of novels which brought the author repeated "best all-time author" votes from fans and in 1975 the First Grand Master Nebula Award.

Heinlein is a staunch "libertarian" in the US revolutionary sense, a man who believes that everyone makes his own destiny; this tale follows the workings of his archetypal "competent man" hero's mind and body through a complex series of circumstances. Pohl and Kornbluth, on the other hand, bring us an offbeat study of a world, cognate with that of Japan in its calorie-low, energy-poor lifestyle, a tale which seems to split into two quite dissimilar halves as attention moves to a gestalt hero, part man, part machine, part community, part hive.

One is often tempted to wonder who, in collaborations, does what; Pohl has revealed that he and Kornbluth both did everything -- the work was a true joint project. For this new edition, Pohl has extensively rewritten many sections, although I found little improvement in the changes; was it, I ask myself, that he chose to expunge some of his colleague's contributions which grated upon him even as he originally agreed to their appearance in print, or has he really had a change of heart about his own earlier writing?

From Sladek we have come to expect a wise-cracking, lateral-thinking view of life in contemporary America. His aunt sallies are the government, technology, the establishment, rednecks, all the things middle America is believed to hold dear. This work -- for some strange reason titled in America *Mechasm* -- provides us with a small-town setting in which everything possible is guyed, goes wrong, and only finally comes together in an oblique resolution that leaves the reader still in suspense.

Unusually for this series, this was the author's first novel; later works have become more quirky and have demonstrated more new wave stylistic tricks, but this is an excellent example of his deadpan humour as well as his occassional pathos and sadness, marking a classic break with earlier SF by its anti-success and anti-scientific stance, and hence offering an ideal antidote to Clarke's essential belief in the goodness of man, Heinlein's aggressive self-sufficiency and the Pohl-Kornbluth



conspiracy theory of civilisation.

With Bob Shaw's book we come back to science in what David Pringle refers to as his tale of a "rogue star" (where Budrys gives us a *Rogue Moon*) in his contribution to Nicholls' *Encyclopaedia*, hailing it as Shaw's "most original, and perhaps his finest novel." Shaw would, I believe, agree that this 1976 tale has been surpassed by many of his more recent novels, but it still offers a poetic and an ingenious plot.

The blurb describes Budrys' book as "a disquieting and original psychological study... of monstrous scientific ambition matched by human obsession," while Silverberg is quoted on the cover as finding in it "the most terrifying pages in any science fiction novel I have ever read." Certainly the idea of suffering the trauma of death -- again and again and again -- is not what one could consider an entertaining pastime, but Budrys makes it gripping without being sickening.

And this "horror" aspect of SF carries over into the last of the dozen books. Pohl's *Man Plus* is man changed to suit life on Mars, man without our humanity, man coupled with machine, a tale of a metamorphosis as frightening and emotionally cathartic as Kafka's.

The best one-word summary of the whole ethos of these dozen novels is undoubtedly "adult." They are aimed at a literate readership, at people who enjoy both words and ideas, at readers who wish to be extended and drawn into new worlds no matter how terrifying or outré. There is no suggestion of "horror fiction" here, no "space opera" with its self-evident parody, and no attempt to write down to the ill-informed. Certainly Clarke is flowing where Delany is chaotic; Sturgeon and Silverberg are challenging, where Shaw and Heinlein provide a more traditional approach to the genre.

To most fans, these books form part of our basic background in "learning about SF." We may visualise them in the format in which they first appeared, maybe serialised in one of the great SF magazines of the past. They are, in a very real sense, a part of us and of our world picture, and we owe Malcolm Edwards a debt of gratitude for reminding us of our roots and making available to us, in such a superb format, these seminal works.

Those who may never have read all (or any) of these titles, or who may have been frightened off some of them by encountering them at an inopportune moment in their reading development, now have the chance to enjoy them, secure at least in the knowledge that a general consensus has found them worthy of reproduction in this excellent new series.

If you take the trouble to turn to the pages of Nicholls' *Encyclopaedia*, you will find that virtually every choice so far meets with the unqualified approval of the specialist writer chosen to review that author's oeuvre. This is not to say that every reader will enjoy every book -- such eclecticism would imply uncritical acceptance rather than true open-mindedness.

Yet one is forced to admit that Malcolm Edwards has offered us the chance to make a re-evaluation of books which should really have been on our bookshelves all the time. And that is what is really the basis of this whole venture: opening up to every reader, novice or hardcore fan alike, the opportunity to sample works that are by general consensus among the very best in the many different areas of our favourite genre. If you doubt this, take a look at the next eight titles which will complete the 1987 programme:

13 Christopher Priest	*Inverted World*
14 Daniel Keyes	*Flowers For Algernon*
15 Robert Sheckley	*Journey Beyond Tomorrow*
16 Harlan Ellison	*Dangerous Visions*
17 Samuel R Delany	*Babel-17*
18 Frederik Pohl & CM Kornbluth	*Gladiator-At-Law*
19 Ward Moore	*Bring The Jubilee*
20 John Crowley	*Beasts*

Yes, that really is a mixed bag, with humour from Sheckley as might be expected, pathos and a very personal view of mankind in Keyes' unique work, science-to-boggle-the-scientist from Chris Priest's fine book, and another man-against-the-political-machine essay from Pohl and Kornbluth. There's an early and excellently done alternate history of the American Civil War from Moore, biologically transformed animals from Crowley, and a relatively straightforward SF tale from Delany -- and, of course, there's that amazing grab-bag of offbeat writing, Ellison's first anthology of "new writing," a venture that was to infuriate his contributors and enthuse his readers and which led not only to the sequel *Again, Dangerous Visions*, but to the still awaited third selection which, by the time it appears, will probably be an instant candidate for the 1999 Gollancz Classic SF shelf.

I hope I shall still be here to enjoy them. By then I'll probably have something like 150 identically bound paperbacks neatly lined up above my desk for easy access whenever I feel nostalgic for "SF like it used to be -- at its best."

THE VIEW FROM THE MOUNTAIN ROAD

Photos: David V Barrett

An interview with Bruce Sterling
by Paul Kincaid

Bruce Sterling is the author of three novels and a host of short stories, many of which are set in the Shaper/Mechanist world of his most recent novel, *Schismatrix*. However, he is perhaps even better known as the ideologue of cyberpunk, a term he only partly repudiates. In this respect he has been prominent under the guise of Vincent Omniaveritas in his fanzine *Cheap Truth* as well as articles in *Interzone* and elsewhere. Most recently he has moved away from cyberpunk, though he has still found time to edit *Mirrorshades: The Cyberpunk Anthology*.

PAUL KINCAID Let's start with an easy question: What is science fiction?

BRUCE STERLING Jesus, that's the easy question? I don't know. I mean there are functional and conceptual definitions of science fiction, and the functional definition can be anything that has a rocket ship on the cover.

PAUL KINCAID But how do you see science fiction, since you obviously have very definite views of it?

BRUCE STERLING Well, I see it as a form of popular culture that is a societal response to the stress of technological change. That's what I call science fiction.

PAUL KINCAID So what should science fiction be doing that it isn't doing now?

BRUCE STERLING It should be talking about real things for one thing. It should be discussing topics that are of importance to the contemporary milieu, to be preparing people for what is to come, to be giving people conceptual tools to deal with the stress of change, to be suggesting what direction change should go in, what's workable, what paths for the future might work. On occasion in the past its primary purpose has been to warn people away from pot-holes in the road, but now the road has so many pot holes in it, it's like you're on a mountain path, there are only certain narrow avenues to survival and those are the ones that should be pointed at. We're surrounded by precipices on all sides, it does very little good to say we might fall off a precipice. A book like Orwell's *1984* assumes the existence of a liberal democracy, that you can warn people against this particular development. Nowadays it seems to me that potential 84's are a dime a dozen, they lurk in almost every cultural direction, so the stakes are much higher now, this is a much more hazardous situation.

PAUL KINCAID So cyberpunk is one route across the mountains?

BRUCE STERLING I would say so, yeh. When I think of cyberpunk, if there are positive aspects to the term itself - which I didn't invent and which no-one likes - it's the idea of fusion, it's the idea of integration between technology and popular culture.

PAUL KINCAID If you don't like the term, what would you prefer to call it?

BRUCE STERLING I would prefer to call it 'modern science fiction', or functionally speaking I would prefer to call it 'commercial science fiction'. A workable kind of science fiction which simply does what science fiction is supposed to do. I don't see it as being the marketing tool of a specific elite, which many people think it is. When my alter ego wrote the *Interzone* manifesto I was at pains to point out that the ideas that back cyberpunk are not the property of any particular clique or set of genre gurus. They don't depend on membership of SFWA or where you live or who you know or who your publisher is - you can write it if you understand it. And I was attempting to help people understand it then. The cyberpunk tag came on later and there's a certain confusion over it, many people mistake the surface gloss of it for the whole thing, they don't see the conceptual backing that makes it really different. The true quill, as it were.

PAUL KINCAID Did it start as a coherent aim or direction?

BRUCE STERLING Well my theory is that in pop culture practice comes first and theory sort of limps along in its tracks. And that's what happened in the case of cyberpunk. The first thing was that there was a certain number of writers who knew one another and were working in a similar direction, and it was only after we had begun to work and we could look across the growing body of our work that we could identify the particular writing strands.

PAUL KINCAID You tend to come across as a rather aggressive theorist.

BRUCE STERLING Yes.

PAUL KINCAID An ideologue. Do you find that in any way gets in the way of your writing?

BRUCE STERLING No.

PAUL KINCAID You automatically write within the theory?

BRUCE STERLING No. Generally I write quite a bit outside the theory also, because I have a general distrust of theories, like most writers. I am not a theorist, I am not a literary critic, I don't have academic training in literary theory. I have perhaps a smattering. But I see it much more as a pop culture thing than a literary thing, I see myself more in the position of someone like a rock journalist than a literary critic.

PAUL KINCAID You've also said that you're not writing cyberpunk any more.

BRUCE STERLING Well, I am and I'm not. I'm not writing work of a particular kind which people have identified as being cyberpunk. But on the other hand I think I am carrying the basic principles out.

PAUL KINCAID That's what I wanted to get at. I wanted to know if you were thinking there was another direction to follow, and that's what you were intending to do.

BRUCE STERLING Well, it's the same direction. The only thing is that it's going to seem different because a lot of people have not grasped the basic direction. They can identify Gibsonian gloss, but they can't really identify the underlying tenets, and when it goes into the next cycle of permutation it's going to seem very strange. But then I've had people say this of me before. The Swanwick article, for instance, says that as a writer I go through transformations, I've already had three careers. But to me they all seem a steady state of progression. I think what Swanwick fails to see are the unifying threads.

PAUL KINCAID There is a direct link, then, between *Involution Ocean* and *Schismatrix*?

BRUCE STERLING Yes.

PAUL KINCAID What is the thread?

BRUCE STERLING Well it's a question of science fiction theory mostly. When I began writing, like most apprentice writers ... well it's an apprentice work, isn't it, it's a journeyman thing, it's like they give a journeyman the job to build a table, they do not say "invent the table". And *Involution Ocean* was very much a pre-built table with a few Sterling curlicues introduced for flavour. And it wasn't until I wrote *Schismatrix* that I felt I had gained enough mastery of the form that I could progress to a slightly more difficult thing. *Involution Ocean* is a remodelled alien adventure story, it's very straight, people fight monsters and there's a quest. It's a steam grommet factory book, in the sense: "Here they're making the steam grommets, and over here is where they polish them, and here in place three is where they are boiled ..." It's a tour. Whereas *Schismatrix*, which also is a tour book, is a much more sophisticated tour book in that the touring mechanisms are much better hidden, and are allied with the conceptual theme of the book rather than being a simple mechanical voyage.

PAUL KINCAID I've also got the impression that you see considerable faults in *Schismatrix* now.

BRUCE STERLING Oh yes, of course.

PAUL KINCAID Would you care to elaborate?

BRUCE STERLING In some sense *Schismatrix* is very much a Gedonken experiment, sort of a question of what one can do with the form, and the form is distorted in the sense that say the Ramones or the Sex Pistols would have distorted a rock 'n' roll form. In other words you turn up the amps to 11 and step on it as hard as you can. And people have pointed out that *Schismatrix* should have been six books, and in a sense for *Schismatrix* to actually be a novel it should have been six novels, as it is it's a sort of grand scale Stapledonian schematic.

PAUL KINCAID I don't think it could have worked as six novels. The whole point was the vastness within the one book.

BRUCE STERLING I would agree with that, but you see when you start to muck about with the novel form in this manner ... I mean, to me the novel form is not really an ideal sort of structure for the particular kind of pop cultural entity that is science fiction. I don't really see science fiction as merely a branch of literature, or a particular kind of literature where the writers don't quite know what they're doing. I see it very much as an alien kind of expression that only happens to be framed in prose, so that gives me more conceptual freedom to do what I would to it. On the other hand, if every book was like *Schismatrix* and people were used to that sort of thing, it s formal faults would not show as they do. But normal books are not written about 170-year life spans and vast circum-solar distances, and really extreme forms of social change. I mean, it's very difficult to write about something like that because those are not issues with which the novel form is prepared to deal.

PAUL KINCAID Have you ever considered bending the form, inventing a new form?

BRUCE STERLING Oh that's what I'm trying to do, in a sense. But it's a difficulty. As I say, I'm not really that gifted a theoretician, and whereas I can see that it ought to be done I'm simply too dirt ignorant to be able to do it with the kind of facility that it needs. On the other hand, I would hope that if *Schismatrix* had a good effect, that it would contribute the areas that I'm strong in, conceptual areas, and that other people with more formal ability would be able to pick it up and make it accessible.

PAUL KINCAID I know how much you admire Ballard, for instance, as a writer. What are your views on the British scene, British writing in science fiction?

BRUCE STERLING Well, they're in a state of flux at the moment. I always have admired British science fiction writing a great deal and you know I consider the British science fiction tradition to be the finest tradition, most British writers are very formally gifted and can write reams around American science fiction writers. I mean, prominent American science fiction writers are scarcely fit to unlatch the shoes of really good British science fiction writers. They certainly succeed in writing qua writing, but whether they are really able to get that sort of pop cultural energy across is another question.

PAUL KINCAID That's what I was leading up to. I just wanted to know if you consider the pop culture quality of cyberpunk or whatever you want to call it is in any way appropriate to a British form of science fiction?

BRUCE STERLING Well it could be. The only question is who will be the first Briton to attempt it, and who will be the first to do it successfully. One can very easily see a sort of third-hand British sci-fiberpunk in which they merely lift convenient images and play with them as they rearrange their literary metaphors. It's a sort of Bach harpsichord transposition of literary tropes, which seems to me quite bloodless and very typically British at the moment. But it seems to me that all it would take is one, perhaps two British science fiction writers whose brains would really ignite, and they would take this and go with it instead of poking it from a distance with a sharp stick to see if it's really alive and does it have a skeleton. It does have a skeleton. It can bite your legs off. The only question is: are you going to get into the mud pit and wrestle the alligator, or are you going to stand behind the wall and toss it bits of bread? The difficulty is that the alligator will eventually bite someone's leg off, and it could very easily be Britain's leg. I can very well imagine, fifteen years from now, should conditions continue the way they have, American science fiction could be very much a thriving and going proposition whereas British science fiction could have vanished and be exclusively an American province. Britons will still read it, but it will have slipped entirely from their hands.

PAUL KINCAID Well, science fiction in America slumped ten, fifteen years ago.

BRUCE STERLING Oh yes, it's been dreadful for many years. But on the other hand it's really hopping right now, and Britons don't seem fully aware of this, they don't seem to know where the action is.

PAUL KINCAID Maybe we work on a different time table?

BRUCE STERLING Could be. In a sense I would like to see this happen because I don't really feel that cyberpunk or the movement would be validated as a true literary movement until it is accepted in Britain. Otherwise it will remain a clique situation, whereas I feel science fiction in general really is in desperate need of multiple viewpoints. We do need Britain. The last time there was any sort of real activity in science fiction, Britain was very heavily involved. It was New Wave, which was essentially a British proposition to begin with. And I question whether the Americans can go it alone. There just aren't that many American writers of ambition, and we need every man-and-woman-Jack in this effort.

PAUL KINCAID But in a way the British movement - and New Wave is a prime example - was not towards the centre of science fiction as cyberpunk is going, but away from science fiction into the literature.

BRUCE STERLING I question that.

PAUL KINCAID One very slick and simple way of looking at cyberpunk is, it's transposing a sort of Chandleresque narrative onto traditional science fictional forms, whereas New Wave was transposing a Joycean narrative onto traditional science fiction forms.

BRUCE STERLING I don't see it that way.

PAUL KINCAID No?

BRUCE STERLING No. For one thing I have never written a Chandleresque thing in my life. And I really doubt very much if you could understand what cyberpunk was unless you had read at least some Sterling, some Cadigan, some Greg Bear. People aren't aware of this. People in Britain have read *Neuromancer*, but they don't really see the full picture.

PAUL KINCAID Yes, our perception of cyberpunk tends to start with Gibson and work out. That sounds like it's not the American perception of cyberpunk.

BRUCE STERLING That's not how I see it. Obviously I'm prejudiced, but speaking objectively, no. And neither did I see British New Wave as a Joycean narrative. To my mind, I'm a big fan of Ballard and I think in a sense Ballard is the only true science fiction writer that era really produced. To my mind he integrates science into the social structure in a way that's very similar to cyberpunk, and deliberately because the cyberpunks are copying his moves essentially. We have studied Ballard's work quite closely and a lot of our ideology is adapted from what he said.

PAUL KINCAID So you're working from a basis of Ballard and going in another direction? Maybe British science fiction should take you and go in another direction?

BRUCE STERLING Well I would definitely advise you not to go in my direction. It would be a very rough ride. And there is nothing to be gained from that. There is nothing to be gained from parodying America. You have to take the good things and throw away the bad things and work from there.

PAUL KINCAID There's a strange ambivalent attitude towards America in so much contemporary American science fiction. I'm thinking of quite a number of things I've read by you and Gibson.

BRUCE STERLING Even Kim Stanley Robinson, who is a contemporary of ours but he's not an ideological ally. There's a great deal of unexpressed hatred of America that's implicit in *The Wild Shore*, in which America's been annihilated by two or three hundred neutron bombs set off simultaneously, and this is an act of destruction essentially.

PAUL KINCAID What is your attitude towards America?

BRUCE STERLING It's a very ambivalent attitude.

PAUL KINCAID There are elements where you seem to be hating everything it stands for, and other elements where you can't avoid a strong patriotic flavour.

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BRUCE STERLING That's fair enough.

PAUL KINCAID You don't feel uncomfortable with the ambivalence?

BRUCE STERLING I don't see how you could live in America now without feeling uncomfortable.

PAUL KINCAID Are you trying to change it through your fiction?

BRUCE STERLING Yes. I would like to think so. I mean, I'm only one person but I have to do my bit. To me it seems if as one person I can influence one other person then I've accomplished something.

PAUL KINCAID Is the political element something you consider basic to your fiction?

BRUCE STERLING No, I could very easily see me writing something non-political in another few years, with Reagan out and a more woolly liberal government that I would feel more comfortable with in. In no sense am I a fanatic or a utopian, I'd be quite happy to see an American government that is more or less muddling along with some sort of rational foreign policy and some modicum of decent feeling for other cultures and other nations, not what we have now. I don't expect miracles, neither do I have some vast social, ideological framework that I would care to impose on everyone else. But on the other hand it's very difficult to observe one's government behaving shamefully and moronically over a long period without becoming radicalised by the sight.

PAUL KINCAID Do you find science fiction a good mode in which to express radical opinion?

BRUCE STERLING I think it's the best mode in which to express radical opinion. It's the only way you can truly express truly radical opinion in a way that by-passes people's instinctive objections. I think you'll find this is very much true in the case of feminist science fiction, which I don't really read that much of, and don't enjoy that much when I do read it, but I find it a very encouraging sign of science fiction's potential that here is this group of politically active people whose ideas really are very radical - I mean radical personally, sexual politics and so on - who can use science fiction as a means of political narrative, essentially as social agit-prop, and be published for it, and be admired for it, and actually have a readership. And in a lot of cases these are people whose point of view is really pretty severely demented, it would be hard to get across any other way. But in science fiction it just sort of glides right in. I would like to see more of that sort of thing done, I would like to see people with really strange views coming out of the woodwork and using science fiction as a mode to get this across.

PAUL KINCAID But there's also a very strong right wing element in the classical science fiction. Do you find yourself hampered by expectations of galactic empires and the Heinlein thing?

BRUCE STERLING Well it doesn't hamper me. I find it kind of loathsome, but I'm glad it's there too in a sense, the mere fact that Heinlein is there. Heinlein gets a pretty bad press, you know, because he's very right wing, but on the other hand there are plenty of other science fiction writers whose ideas are just as nutty as his. I mean, essentially he's a crank. He's not really a guy in jackboots the way some left wing commentators would have you believe. He's by no means a statist, or a Stalinist, or an authoritarian, or Hitlerian, or whatever. He's a crank, he's a guy with pronounced opinions which don't really fit in with anyone else's universe. And in a sense the mere fact that he's standing there dragging science fiction in one particular direction loosens the boundaries and gives other people the opportunity to promulgate other ideas, equally odd but in the other direction.

PAUL KINCAID It gives you something to fight against?

BRUCE STERLING I don't really see fighting against Heinlein, that would just be internecine warfare. On the contrary, I think the things worth fighting against, I very much suspect that Heinlein and I would end up on the same side of the barricades. The first thing that would happen that would really cause me to take up arms would be if a government were to crack down on the press and freedom of speech. That's where I really draw the line, when censorship begins I'm out in the street with a rifle. And I very much suspect that Heinlein would be out there, and he'd probably have a bigger rifle than mine, and better amunition. But I feel very little doubt that we would both be there, I would be perfectly happy to perish on the barricades beside Heinlein. I would much prefer to help Heinlein draw up the death list, but obviously I would prefer to survive rather than die.

But to get bent out of shape over Heinlein's things strikes me as the sort of storm in a teacup that's very typical of science fiction. It's an ignorance of larger issues, there are bigger fish in the sea than Heinlein, or Pournelle or Poul Anderson, or any of that sort of armed libertarian crowd. These guys don't amount to that much, they're not a social threat by any means.

PAUL KINCAID What's been the popular response to your kind of science fiction in America?

BRUCE STERLING That's hard to say. It's an ambivalent response. In the case of people who simply buy science fiction I think it's been a fairly favourable response, I mean Gibson's book sells, my book sells a bit.

PAUL KINCAID I remember in this country a couple of years ago when Gibson's work and your work and Shepard's started getting distributed over here, a real wave of excitement, as if someone was saying "Thank God someone's doing something about science fiction". Did the same thing happen in America?

BRUCE STERLING I think very much so, yeh. I think to a certain extent it's still happening, it's starting to broaden. This is a sign of people taking science fiction seriously on its own terms. Someone who's really willing to get down and dirty with it, not just prod it from a distance in the hope it might be saved for the glorious cause of literature, but to really just jump in there screaming and be willing to put the full amount of work into it. And there are many writers in the States who are by no means affiliated with cyberpunk and would be unhappy to be called that and might even consider that an insult, but who nevertheless are very serious science fiction writers and really believe in the methods and the possibilities and so forth, and are willing to put in a full day's work and do an honest job. They don't just want to dabble with it and then hope that they won't get tarred with the label sf writer, and neither do they regard it with contempt and want to do just a bit of it for the punters so they can make some money. These are people who prefer to work in science fiction because they believe they can do things with it that other forms of writing can't do. And I believe this is true, there are things you can do in science fiction that are impossible in other forms of writing. There are topics you can discuss that are undiscussable in straight literature, and there are solecisms you can commit that are impossible in straight literature.

PAUL KINCAID Bruce Sterling, thank you.

BOOKS

REVIEWS EDITED BY
Paul Kincaid

TOURMALIN'S TIME CHEQUES - F. Anstey
PLANETOID 127 - Edgar Wallace
[Greenhill, 1986, 172pp & 147pp, £8.95 each]
Reviewed by Tom A. Jones

GREENHILL ARE PRODUCING A SERIES OF historical SF stories, *Planetoid* first seeing print in 1929 and *Tourmalin* in 1885. The consulting editor, Brian Stableford, is an expert on this subject, as those of you who have read his pieces in *Vector* will know. There is little doubt that the intent of such a series is to be applauded, but as a reviewer I must also look at the stories: how good are they, and are they value for money?

Planetoid 127 concerns a scientist who is able to contact another Earth and from there gain information which allows him to make lots of money on the stock market which puts him into dire conflict with a a financier. Stableford sums the story up in his afterword:

> Wallace wrote at a furious pace, often carelessly, and much of his work is clumsy in construction ... but it does have a certain breathless excitement

In fact what we have here is an idea, original for its time but now well known, around which Wallace has written a story which owes more to crime fiction than SF. It's a very quick read, the story doesn't start until page 11 and there are only about 150 words per page (big type, lots of space), ie. a novelette rather than a novel. I'm not happy about that.

Tourmalin's Time Cheques is different, it's a comedy. Mr Tourmalin is on a cruise and is offered the opportunity to 'bank' spare time which he can withdraw at a later date, returning to the ship for the number of minutes drawn. Unfortunately, time isn't returned to him in chronological sequence, and confusion and complexity ensue. How is it to be resolved? Here we have the big let down, again to quote Stableford's afterword: "this way of resolving a plot has become one of the most insipid of literary cliches." Perhaps he is right when he says it wasn't as well worn then as now, none the less you are likely to feel cheated. Oh yes, sorry, but at least I won't give it away.

The book is better written than *Planetoid 127*, Ansty has a good comic style but now dated. For me the joke wore thin, but I did like the idea of time cheques and don't remember coming across it anywhere else.

For me these two aren't classics and don't measure up to the best of today's SF. If reviewing them as new I'd not recommend either (though I'd note the idea of time cheques). So I am torn between wishing to commend this attempt to return to print some of our historical building blocks but can't actually advise you to spend money on either of these books.

ROBOT DREAMS - Isaac Asimov
[Gollancz, 1987, 349pp, £10.95]
Reviewed by Nik Morton

SOME READERS MAY BUY THIS THINKING it a new collection of Robot stories, and the title and drawings of robots at the beginning of each story may encourage that belief. Well, it isn't. 'Little Lost Robot' appears again, as does 'The Martian Way', 'The Last Question' and 'The Ugly Little Boy', among others. The stories date between 1947 and 1986, many from the 1950s. There is a three page introduction outlining where Dr Asimov managed to get his predictions right, and where, using the knowledge of the day, he got them wrong; otherwise, the collection is without the usual self-idolatry or mock-boastful passages.

The new story, written for this collection, was inspired by the cover illustration by Star Wars artist Ralph McQuarrie. As Asimov states, it is "beautiful and humanizes a robot in a way I have never seen before." Mind you, as it very closely resembles the sleeping pose of Lord Leighton's oil painting *Flaming June* (c.1895), that humanising should not be too difficult to observe. McQuarrie's sketches of robots head all stories, even those concerned with neither robots or computers, and some stories also contain textual artwork which is well done and in the main acurately depicts images from the fiction. As for the new story: 'Robot Dreams' concerns Susan Calvin and a new and unproven robopsychologist implausibly called Linda Rash, who rashly gives a robot the ability to dream. And the level upon which dreams function is below the operable level of the Three Laws ... As with many Asimov short stories, it would be as good as a radio play - the description and imagery are thin on the ground.

Asimov's name sells books, new generations are likely to come into SF via his works, so we shouldn't be surprised when yet another collection is printed, albeit so many stories can be found in other collections. But I doubt if the seemingly constant regurgitation of the same old stories, mixed up and stitched under a new cover, with fine accompanying drawings, will do SF short story sales a single bit of good.

If you're a completist or like Asimov, then buy this book; all the usual hallmarks are there. But remember, the once-prolific Dr Asimov could possibly regenerate interest in the short story - with *new* material; at present, he is at risk of contributing to its death throes through uncaring "pretentious sleekness".

THE ROVING MIND - Isaac Asimov
[Oxford University Press, 1987, 348pp, £5.95]
A NEW SCIENCE OF LIFE - Rupert Sheldrake
[Paladin, 1987, 287pp, £3.95]
Reviewed by Darroll Pardoe

THE FRINGES OF SCIENCE, WHERE IT shades into philosophy, or religion, or the occult, or just throws up curiosities such as spontaneous combustion or encysted toads, exert an absorbing fascination. Isaac Asimov has a remarkable talent for writing short, entertaining essays on any science-based subject you could think of, and here he touches on many such matters, along with more orthodox topics such as black holes and genetic engineering. In this he follows in the footsteps of the late Willy Ley, whose column in *Galaxy* was compulsive reading for me in the fifties. One of the essays in Asimov's book, 'The Rôle of the Heretic', deals with the way the scientific 'establishment' reacts to heterodox opinions and theories, and can profitably be borne in mind when reading the Sheldrake book.

The observations which prompted Sheldrake to erect his hypothesis of "formative causation" - especially in the field of embryology - are still largely unexplained, and to his credit he suggests experiments which might throw light on the matter and act as a test of his hypothesis. But he has been unable to resist the temptation to allow an elaborate theoretical frame-work of "morphogenetic fields" and "morphic resonance" to rest on a very slender observational base. I'm reminded of those medieval scholars who produced long, detailed, perfectly reasoned encyclopedic accounts of all human knowledge; or perhaps of the elaborate mathematical treatment of psionic fields which was mentioned in *Astounding* at the height of Campbell's love affair with the Hieronymous machine. Even if experiment shows that the effects he mentions do exist, the eventual theory to explain them is unlikely to bear much relation to the Sheldrake hypothesis. No shame in that - surely the function of visionaries such as Sheldrake is the stimulation of further effort both practical and speculative. For the prsent the verdict can only be the old Scottish one: "not proven".

Read and enjoy both of these excellent books.

B O O K S

STARING AT THE SUN - Julian Barnes
[Jonathan Cape, 1986, 195pp, £9.95]
Reviewed by Maureen Porter

IS THIS NOVEL SCIENCE FICTION? Although it starts during the Second World War, the conclusion is reached somewhere in the early years of the 21st century, so on timescale alone, one could say that it is. It also makes certain predictions about life beyond 1987, so in that sense one could say it is. But I'm not convinced, in the same way that I'm not convinced that the majority of the novel discusses the attitudes that society has had towards women over this century. In fact, I find *Staring at the Sun* an irritating mish-mash of ideas and thoughts, but written with such elegance and style that I can't find it in my heart to dismiss it entirely.

To make things even more annoying the novel can actually be broken into two distinct parts, something which causes me to believe that it is two smaller works linked rather tenuously by the main character of the first part re-appearing as the mother of the major character in the second part. The first part charts Jean Serjeant's life through the war, her drift into marriage and her subsequent escape. A rather fanciful girl, only half in touch with the real world, she is happy to leave the men in her world to do the thinking for her, never questioning the decisions. When it comes to her fiancé sending her to a contraception specialist without explaining what's happening, she accepts even this without a murmur. The marriage is a disaster but it takes twenty years for her to break free, pregnant with a child who turns into a distressingly conventional man, quiet, withdrawn and happy to be so, his tragedy being that he has an original mind whose existence he almost deliberately denies.

The second part concerns Gregory's attempts to come to terms with the nature of death. By now we are beyond 1987. Everything seems much the same except that life lasts much longer and old age has finally become acceptable, mostly as a result of old people rebelling against their treatment by society. Euthanasia is normal but Gregory is increasingly obsessed with suicide and spends much of his time keying questions into the General Purposes Computer, which theoretically holds the sum of human knowledge. His explorations reveal that it doesn't, and it later becomes clear that the computer is as fallible as the people who actually answer the questions. It is ironic that a computer cannot substitute for human discussion, and Gregory eventually achieves understanding through questioning his mother.

So what do we have? One woman's struggle to come to terms with her life, and one man's efforts to reach an understanding of his life. The SF trappings are almost incidental, and the repeated motif of seeing the sun rise twice, from a plane at different heights - well, that's thrown away. On the other hand, it's a challenging book and beautifully written, but I think it proves that SF will never be Julian Barnes' forte, and he's wiser in sticking to delicate dissections of character.

ARTIFACT - Gregory Benford
[Bantam, 1986, 533pp]
Reviewed by David Wingrove

ARTIFACT IS A HYBRID: BENFORD'S FIRST venture into the bestseller/thriller genre, but with more than a dash of speculative physics. An archæological dig in Greece unearths a strange artifact which proves to have extraordinary powers. A large cube containing a black cone, it is, in fact, the packaging for a tiny black hole - one of a twinned pair which have fallen out of equilibrium and which, throughout the novel, travel through rock to try to get together again. The idea is pure SF - but the handling isn't always up to Benford's best.

John Bishop, the MIT man who gets caught up in this situation, is mild-mannered, unadventurous, and perpetually surprised to discover himself involved in such an adventure. Partnering him, in more than one sense, is Claire Anderson, the capable woman who first discovered the artifact. These are well-drawn, satisfactory characters. Less satisfying are the villains, particularly Major Kontos who, while his sheer nastiness is an effective melodramatic ploy, proves too easy a target. He's a black hat from a western, not a real being, and undermines our sense of the potential reality of the situation.

It's the mid-1990s and the world is even more hostile to America than now. This allows for some politicking, and finally an overt confrontation between the Greek army and the CIA as the two black holes come together, but the best parts of the book are those in which Benford does what he's best at, illuminating a mystery by slow degrees. Midway through, the writing has a real charge as the scientists find this ancient artifact - dating from about 1400 years before Christ - is a piece of state-of-the-art physics: a singularity.

The book ends in uncertainties - is there a sequel here? It's also, in several simple ways, unsatisfying. Kontos, like all deserving villains, gets his, but Bishop's hands are clean. The singularity did it, ripping Kontos apart in a scene graphically and horrifically described. This is a cop-out, Benford builds the need for vengence without satisfying it. Which is not to mention the degree of coincidence involved - in true thriller style - in this happening.

For a first venture into this area, this works far better than most, but it's far from Benford at his best and only in those central chapters did I really find myself engrossed. One final thing - the Greek settings and the archæological bits are well described - like all good bestseller writers, Benford did his homework.

IN ALIEN FLESH - Gregory Benford
[Tor, 1986, 280pp, $14.95]
Reviewed by David Wingrove

COLLECTIONS ARE INTERESTING THINGS. Song cycles rather than symphonies, they illustrate either the obsessive single-mindedness or the eclectic diversity of their creator. If expressions of the different facets of an author, they're often rich but flawed. Unless a writer can produce a dozen perfectly crafted pieces across the spectrum, he's bound to expose weaknesses as well as strengths. This is true of *In Alien Flesh*, Greg Benford's first collection.

Spanning the years 1975-85, the 11 stories and one poem present many aspects of a writer whose work fuses the best in hard, traditional SF with a genuine sensitivity to the full range and potential of literary expression. Benford has a first-rate intellect and his speculations here are sharp and cutting, but unlike past generations of science-oriented writers, his prose sometimes sings too. Stories like 'Of Space/Time and the River' are reminiscent of M.John Harrison's *New Worlds* stories of alien intrusion, and the range of his stylistic experimentation - perhaps best shown in the novella 'To the Storming Gulf' - has rarely been matched outside the pages of that magazine. Which is not to say that these are bleak, nihilistic visions of society's death; there's an undeniable human warmth running through the collection. But somewhere along the line he has harnessed style, subject matter and feeling to produce a new wave hybrid that's surprising, enlightening and sometimes just plain awe-inspiring.

'Relativistic Effects' is a good example: an idea straight out of Poul Anderson's *Tau Zero*, but it fuses human interest, speculative physics and poetic description in a manner the normal Hard SF school seems incapable of. 'Doing Lennon' is another, where the basic idea of waking up in the future and impersonating Lennon, successfully, is given one further twist to lift the story from the category of interesting idea and give the whole thing real resonance.

If there's a real weakness it is in the writing of the opening story, 'In Alien Flesh'. Only here does Benford's style fail to meet his high design. But it's a small failing in a collection which - culled from a good few dozen uncollected stories - is perhaps the strongest I've read in many a year.

B O O K S

A CLOCKWORK ORANGE: A PLAY WITH MUSIC - Anthony Burgess
[Hutchinson, 1987, 48pp, £5.95]
Reviewed by K.V.Bailey

BURGESS IS BY INCLINATION LIBRETTIST and (inadequately recognised) composer as much as novelist. With this goes a disposition to miscegenate mood and media, mingling satire and sensibility, comedy and tragedy. Thus, hilariously and heart-breakingly, 'The Wreck of the Deutschland' is Hollywoodised in *The Clockwork Testament*; a musical of Trotsky's life is woven into *The End of the World News*. Beethoven is almost a compulsion, and his most ambitiously 'experimental' work, *Napoleon Symphony*, is framed by the 'Eroica'. Another preoccupation is with the subliminal resonances of language - only one so oriented could have achieved *Joysprick* and *The Shorter Finnegans Wake*.

Such preoccupations and techniques went into *A Clockwork Orange*, his 1962 dystopia. They enter more comprehensively into this 'musical' version. As in the original, an exploitation of the phonetically associative/dissociative potential of certain Russian words, structured into gang-macho idiom, results in an evocative slang of sleezy alienation. The dramatic possibilities of his theme of free will and the nature of evil are explored in a succession of disjointed scenes which create, for the reader, a 'bittiness' absent from the original; but music, drawn chiefly from the Beethoven symphonies, is an imaginative dynamic, sustaining and releasing tension and ironically counterpointing the theme.

The playing of appropriate tape passages will support a stronger experience than the text alone allows, though Burgess, in an interesting Introduction, dismisses any 'operatic' pretensions - as he does Kubrick's downbeat interpretation of the original. He favours group performances of his "harmless little lyrics" to the setting of Beethoven "freely banged around on a piano". Perhaps too dismissively, he appears to regard this work more as exorcism than resurrection. Actually, though he has often treated his near-obsessive Augustinian/Pelagian theme with greater sophistication, the very simplicity of this 'morality' gives it enduring bite.

A FALL OF MOONDUST - Arthur C. Clarke
[Gollancz, 1987, 224pp, £3.50]
THE MAN IN THE HIGH CASTLE - Philip K. Dick
[Penguin, 1987, 249pp, £3.95]
A WREATH OF STARS - Bob Shaw
[Gollancz, 1987, 189pp, £2.95]
LAST AND FIRST MEN - Olaf Stapledon
[Penguin, 1987, 327pp, £3.95]
Reviewed by Jim England

IF THESE ARE CLASSIC WORKS OF SF, they are all 'classic' in different senses. One definition of a classic is a work of 'outstanding importance'. This does not mean it is essential reading matter, an enjoyable read, or even readable. When I first read *Last and First Men* in my early teens it was an austere, mind-blowing experience at a time when I had never heard the term 'mind-blowing' used. The experience has proved unforgettable. It hardly needs saying to the cognoscenti that nothing has been written on as grand a scale since its publication in 1930, that it was an important influence upon later SF and, as Brian Aldiss says in his foreword, that it is "among the most imaginative works ever written". Every SF reader should at least know something about it but, as Aldiss says, parts now have only a "period charm".

A Fall of Moondust is a classic in quite a different sense, ie. it is an early novel by a classic SF writer and also a classic example of a book based on a hypothesis (that the moon has seas of choking dust) which has proved mistaken. Despite the quote by John Wyndham on the front cover ("The best book Arthur C. Clarke has done") it is by no means his best book.

The above was first published in 1961; *A Wreath of Stars* in 1976. It could be argued that this is too recent for it to have 'classic' status. It is described by Ian Watson as being "unputtable down, magnificently implausible" and both comments seem fair. Perhaps it should be regarded as a classic example of one of Shaw's "unputtable down" books, of which there are many. Despite being slightly more implausible than Clarke's book, the average SF reader will probably find it more entertaining.

The Man in the High Castle, first published in 1962, is the odd one out. A classic example of an 'alternate world' novel by Philip K. Dick, it is eccentric, surrealistic and not at all unputtable down. In fact, readers who do not care to imagine in great detail what might have happened if Germany and Japan had won the War and like straightforward linear narrative may find the temptation to put it down very strong, at first. On the back cover someone has described it as "painstakingly constructed" and the author as: "the most brilliant sci-fi mind on any planet". Do not be put off. It helps in reading it to be a US citizen, preferably Californian, to have some knowledge of German and Japanese culture, and not to be a stickler for lucid English, but many people without these qualifications will find it well worth reading.

FICTIONS OF NUCLEAR DISASTER - David Dowling
[Macmillan, 1987, 239pp, £27.50]
Reviewed by Mike Christie

THE POST-HOLOCAUST STORY IS ONE OF the more persistent subgenres of SF, and the decades since the war are strewn with fine examples, too numerous to mention one might think. Dowling would not agree. In this book he manages to cite well over two hundred works, and while many of them are undoubtedly worthy, after fifty or so the insistent references start to blur and blend together.

This is a pity, because where Dowling does give himself room he has a substantial argument to make, and a perceptive view of many classics. His bent is idealist: he believes that to write about nuclear disaster involves the writer in a moral choice over the presentation. If he presents nuclear war as something survivable, acceptable even, then Dowling argues that he is irresponsible, for he should instead be endeavouring to awaken people to the appalling reality.

How this can be achieved is another subject on which Dowling is interesting. He covers Jewish fictions of the Holocaust in some detail, demonstrating the inability of accepted style and language to evoke the reality of the concentration camps, and comments that:

> The trap of well-intentioned indulgence is to be avoided only by creating special fictional patterns or documenting by indirection, calling on all the fictional resources of implication and silence.

Several post-modernist works are discussed and quoted, and the techniques examined. It's a pity that some of the more encyclopedic listings of relevant works were not jettisoned in favour of more of this debate.

The book's last chapter is by far the best. In it, Dowling picks *Riddley Walker* by Russell Hoban and *A Canticle for Leibowitz* by Walter M. Miller as two 'exemplary fictions' for a more extended analysis. Here there is some depth and consequently more for a reader to chew on, especially in the discussion of *Canticle*, which Dowling analyses, perhaps a touch moralistically, in terms of a dichotomy between wisdom and power.

Thirty pages are not enough. If you're curious, browse the last chapter and the conclusion in a library somewhere. For the rest, you might just as well read the Nicholls article on 'The Holocaust and After'.

THE SECOND GREAT DUNE TRILOGY - Frank Herbert
[Gollancz, 1987, 1111pp, £10.95]
Reviewed by Chris Barker

THIS IS AN OMNIBUS EDITION OF *THE God Emperor of Dune*, *The Heretics of Dune*, and *Chapter House Dune*, and

B O O K S

since they have been reviewed already in *Vector* and *Paperback Inferno*, this will be a personal overview of the Dune saga. It is a saga, and therefore the title is something of a misnomer, particularly as it was clear that Herbert intended to write at least one more Dune novel (some may also find 'Great' a little presumptive!). This saga highlights the problems even good SF writers seem to have: bringing their epics to a satisfactory conclusion. Let's not be evasive about this, with any series of novels no matter how good they are individually, considerable skill is required to finish them. Sadly, we will never know how well Mr Herbert might have achieved this goal.

Dune is one of my favourite SF novels; the combined elements of ecology, power politics, genetic manipulation, religion, and the Messiah figure Paul Muad'dib were woven together into an exciting, complex plot. However, by the time I got to *Children of Dune* I had lost the impetus to read any further when the novels appeared in regular succession. I started afresh with *God Emperor* for this review but soon ran into similar difficulties. The principal reason is that as Herbert has extended out from his original novel, the reader is exposed to reoccurring elements which originally were interesting and novel but have become jaded and boring. There are numerous examples: the obligatory pearls of wisdom before each chapter, the attempts of increasingly God-like Atreides to manipulate (benevolently) the human race, and the style of writing whereby characters are constantly reflecting back in such a way as to produce a static effect (this also involves considerable philosophical speculation which at times, eg. in *God Emperor*, overbalances to create a turgid debate), and finally the increasingly tedious reappearances of Duncan Idaho gholas from axolotl tanks. None of these books are really bad, I don't regret having read them, but for me they add nothing to the original trilogy. Which brings me back to the the question: when should you end your saga?

THE INVADERS PLAN - L. Ron Hubbard (556pp)
BLACK GENESIS - L. Ron Hubbard (426pp)
[New Era, 1985 & 1986, £10.95 each]
Reviewed by Ken Lake

YOU ALL KNOW WHO ELRON IS: INVENTOR of Ole Doc Methuselah, one of my favourite oldtime SF characters; inventor of Dianetics and founder of Scientology; in more recent times author of that monumental mass of rubbish, *Battlefield Earth*.

The Old Master has excelled himself in these two volumes (to be followed, we are assured, by eight more); 556 pages in Volume One followed by a cheapskate 426 in Volume Two (at the same price), and thankfully the text is big and well-spaced so the bulk is deceptive - as indeed are the claims of Orson Scott Card, Donald Kingsbury, Anne McCaffrey, A.E.Van Vogt, *The Times* and the *Nottingham Evening Post*, all of whom seem to believe there's literature between the covers.

So what *do* we have? There's a pompous introduction in which the author likens himself to Mark Twain, Kepler, Verne, Horace, Juvenal and a few others, where he pots SF history for us and where, under the complete misapprehension that knowing what a word *means* indicates that one can practice the art satisfactorily, explains *satire* to us from four different angles.

There's a few more twiddly bits, and then we're off into a turgid, heavy-handed, plodding, repetitive pastiche of every bit of bad imitation SF you've ever cringed from.

Let me introduce: the cheerful robot brain - "Hi there! I am 54 Charlee Nine ..."; the unkillable, upright, handsome, boring hero; the sneering, skulking, threatening villain; the conniving Lords; the wooden-headed soldiery; the funny names (the Countess Krak, the Widow Tayl, our hero Jettero Heller, known as Jet occasionally, but not often as that would cut down the wordage ...); the incredibly ingenious placenames (Slum City, Port City, Joy City and a few more); the long, pointless dialogues with a literal-minded computer; the manufactured folk history, legends, rhymes and songs that rub in the coincidences that aren't, only everyone's too dim to realise this; and finally, the narrator, Officer Gris, who is so amazingly thick he's a cardboard cut-out of a caricature of a badly-drawn cartoon.

Worst of all, though, is the repetition. As an exercise in masochism, I rewrote one chapter just tautly enough to keep a child's attention; it came out at one-tenth the length and would have gained a lot from the judicious wielding of a blue pencil even at that stage.

The story? Don't ask. If it really worries, pop ino a bookshop, read the blurbs in two minutes flat and save yourself £21.90 at a stroke. Use the money to buy some SF!

THE WINDEATER/TE KAIHAU - Keri Hulme
[Hodder & Stoughton, 1987, 240pp, £10.95]
Reviewed by K.V.Bailey

THE AUTHOR WON THE 1985 BOOKER WITH *The Bone People*. In this present collection Maori lore, culture shock and conflict, New Zealand landscapes and rural and urban squalors are permeating motifs. Presentational modes are variously experimental - film script, stream of consciousness, fable/fantasy, poetry, episodic narration, confessional manuscript. Humans, insects, birds, fish and crustaceans live, and die often horribly, each indifferent to while feeding on the existence of others. Humans seem to feed emotionally on each other; yet it is through the personae of some of her humans that Keri Hulme reveals the extent of her empathy for the nature of what is destroyed and what destroys, what is consumed and what consumes. In the title story the narrator's father is a horse butcher, gentle and dispassionate in his killing of the beasts, whose rooms are covered with photographs of them before death "ears pricked forward, eyes liquidly ashine and alert." She adds: "My father loves horses more than he does humans but I rather hope he will put my photo in some small spare space soon." Towards the end of her narrative she says: "What I seem to have created for you is an old spiderweb, the kind that is a gallery of past feasts." There are times when empathy gets mixed with the violence of cruelty or blind catastrophe, but even there, as in 'One Whale Singing', empathy dominates.

Although all of these stories are relevant to the human planetary condition, their relevance thrown into relief by their enactment within what seems at this remove a strangely beautiful but alien environment (and when you go there, that's what it is!), some are nearer to *Vector*'s focus of concern than others. There is the startling Götterdammerung-flavoured dénouement of a Valkyrie manifestation in the midst of a demo-riot in 'Swansong'; the chilling Faustian-style horror of 'Kaibutsu-San', played out in a street-world of muggers and sharpers; the ambiguous star-exile ending of 'Planetismal', which has something in common with Bradbury's *The Illustrated Man*; and the archetypal overtones of 'King Bait'. An element of extraterrestrial fantasy is, however, strongest in the schizoid hallucinations of alien, anti-matter and apocalypse which conclude 'The Windeater'. One feels after reading that there has been throughout a search for 'one spare small space' for the one who writes; but for the visions and insights of the quest she is both lens and mirror.

A WARNING TO THE CURIOUS: THE GHOST STORIES OF M.R.JAMES - M.R.James (Selected & Introduced by Ruth Rendell)
[Hutchinson, 1987, 257pp, £9.95]
Reviewed by Jon Wallace

IT'S DIFFICULT TO READ AND REVIEW A book by M.R.James this far away from the original publication. Eighty years is a long time, and things that were fresh and new to the reading public then have had plenty of time to be imitated, copied and parodied until

they become, at best old hat, at worst downright funny. When I first read these stories (a few years ago and in a different collection) my reactions were along those lines. To someone inured to such monsters as those in John Carpenter's film *The Thing*, James' creations can seem tame.

> ... it was very much the same as this wall here in colour and it had a bit of a band like round underneath. And the eyes, well they was dry-like, and much as if there were big spider's bodies in the holes. (The Uncommon Prayer Book)

But a careful reading of these stories soon reveals that James' idea is not to create monsters but suspense and to jostle the sensibilities of the reader a trifle. In her introduction Ruth Rendall says:

> ... would defy anyone, after 'Abbot Thomas' has been read and inwardly digested, to reach up blindly ... to retrieve something without the fear of the object putting out its arms to clasp his round the neck.

And this neatly points up the strength of M.R.James' work, not the actual execution of the pieces, the detailing of the endless trivia involved in so many of his characters' lives, not the suspense engendered by the contrast of these trivia to the events that we, the readers, are sure will come, not the creatures that do come in the end, but the way that these creatures come, the almost diffident way in which we discover that all is not as we would like it. The cousin in 'Number 13' only realises there is something strange when his suitcase is not where he left it, and he discovers that his room has a window less at night than during the day. The gentleman who procures engravings for his University art museum half listens to a friend explaining his views on the foreground figure in 'The Mezzotint', a figure that is himself had seen no trace of earlier.

These instances reveal a subtlety in James' work that many of his imitators fail to capture, and this subtlety is what makes these stories still worth reading.

SINCE HIS WORK CAME OUT OF COPYRIGHT at the beginning of the year, there has been a veritable bonanza of M.R. James ghost story collections. Another recent and excellent book is **Casting the Runes and Other Ghost Stories** (Oxford, 1987, 352pp, £3.95). Edited and introduced by noted Jamesian scholar Michael Cox, it contains 21 stories, three of which, 'The Experiment', 'The Malice of Inanimate Objects' and 'A Vignette', were not included in the Collected Edition of his work. The textual corrections that have been incorporated in the stories, and the Explanatory Notes on each story, make this an invaluable edition for everyone who enjoys the classic English ghost story. (PK)

SCIENCE FICTION MASTER INDEX OF NAMES – Keith L. Justice (Comp.) (McFarland, 1986, 394pp, £29.95) Reviewed by Paul Kincaid

THIS IS THE SORT OF REFERENCE BOOK that critics and students cry out for and so rarely find. As the title says, it is a master index of SF, so, within its pages, you will discover that Henry Kuttner is referred to on pp 115 and 124 of *British and American Utopian Literature 1516-1975* by Sargent or that there is a reference to John Boorman on p 81 of the Nicholls *Encyclopedia*. In other words, it tells you exactly where to look when you are reading up on any SF writer. And the list is remarkably comprehensive, from AE (pseud. of George William Russell) to Allen Zweig (pseud. of Frederik Pohl) there are heaven knows how many thousands of names, some, like Isaac Asimov, getting a full page of references, others, like Charles Partington, just one mention. There are, inevitably omissions, mostly of newer writers – Gwyneth Jones, Colin Greenland, Mary Gentle, Rudy Rucker and Geoff Ryman are all noticeable by their absence – but just about every writer of SF active before about 1984 is included, along with numerous marginal figures like Margaret Drabble, both Durrells, and Agricola.

As to the accuracy of the index, that's another matter. It works only for the American editions quoted, so that I found it impossible to chase up references from this work in my Corgi edition of *Billion Year Spree*, or my Gollancz edition of *The Way the Future Was* (particularly galling since this edition doesn't have an index of its own). In the same hand, I found references in Bretnor's *The Craft of Science Fiction* which were not listed in that book's own index. And since the vast majority of SF criticism and reference material is, alas, only available in American editions, this volume remains immensely useful.

Its major shortcoming is the limited list of titles quoted. Only 132 reference and non-fiction books are listed in the index, and despite the paucity of good SF criticism that is still but a drop in the ocean. Thus anyone using this book to research, say, Moorcock, would miss such important sources as Greenland's *The Entropy Exhibition*. Justice has produced a vast and vital work, but he has no more than scratched the surface of the monumental task still to be done.

THE JOURNAL OF NICHOLAS THE AMERICAN – Leigh Kennedy (Cape, 1986, 208pp, £9.95) Reviewed by Mike Moir

THE JOURNAL OF NICHOLAS THE AMERICAN was published in September 1986 and, as often happens to mainstream 'first' novels, did not cause much of a stir. I can only assume it was a deliberate ploy on the part of Jonathan Cape to package it as an ordinary mainstream novel. This route could have consigned the book to oblivion. Luckily Leigh Kennedy was known to some SF fans as an excellent short story writer and Cape had already published her marvellous collection *Faces*. More fortunate still, the panel for this year's Nebula recognised its worth and added it to the nomination list. Six months late, it has moved from oblivion to deserved acclaim.

This easily qualifies as an SF novel: any novel treating empathy seriously has to be classified as SF. On the other hand I can understand Cape's reluctance to classify it thus, as the book feels like a mainstream novel. Perhaps also there is a publishing mentality that would think it a shame to drag down such an excellent new talent with a genre label.

Nicholas is, he claims, an American; a second generation American of Russian origin. He is an alcoholic. He drinks to dull his senses, which are particularly acute. He is "a mirror with a soul", a true empath. The classic dichotomy; an objectionable drunk who is also the world's best listener.

Nicholas is working his way, very slowly, through college, hoping one day to become a librarian because, unlike people, books don't scream out emotions to him. By necessity he is a loner; ordinary people suck him dry, while his family, with its male line all empaths, invade his mind.

When Nicholas sees a girl called Jack he has a close relationship outside his family for the first time. Naturally Jack has big problems, they have to be to make her want to tame duck a Russian drunk. Her mother, Suzanne, is dying of cancer and that is making her family fall apart.

Like a moth to a flame, Nicholas is drawn to the mother. Her dying is like a drug to him, a drug that could kill him. His problems never seem to come singly. Like the possessor of any unusual talent he is terrified of discovery and someone's getting close. He needs to stay one step ahead of his pursuer, but is still drawn relentlessly to the dying Suzanne.

The novel is not without faults. The character of Nicholas switches a little too conveniently between downtrodden hero and objectionable drunk, and the inevitable ending of the central relationship is softened perhaps too neatly. But the faults are minor compared to the achievement. The book is finely written and mesmerising. Kennedy succeeds in the almost impossible task of getting the reader inside the mind of a believable empath. With a couple more novels under her belt she will be a major force in any fiction field she chooses. Hopefully it will continue to be SF.

B O O K S

SUPERNATURAL TALES - Vernon Lee
(Peter Owen, 1987, 222pp, £10.95)
Reviewed by **Mark Valentine**

VERNON LEE WROTE MANY VOLUMES OF aesthetical essays, setting out in refined prose her views on the arts, places, ethics and style. They are virtually unread today, except among collectors of *fin de siecle* literature. Her fantastic stories, six of which are gathered here, have survived rather better, but even they are not as widely known as they deserve. They are often located in Italy, which she knew intimately, and drew on actual or invented legends from Medieval and Renaissance times, or other historical periods. Most combine a Gothic grandeur of scene and grotesqueness of incident with a more modern delicacy of narration and psychological insight. Five of these tales may be regarded as revolving around the dual, and ambiguously mingled, themes of obsession and possession. In 'Prince Alberic and the Snake Lady', the youthful prince's childhood fascination with an ancient, intricate tapestry leads him to search out the truth behind the legendary zoomorphic maiden it depicts, with tragic results. In 'The Virgin of the Seven Daggers', a powerful and rapacious nobleman risks perdition for the sake of a necromantic encounter with a Moorish princess embalmed in a fabulous mausoleum beneath the Alhambra palace. 'Amour Dure' consists of passages from the diary of a young scholar for whom a 16th century duchess of evil repute becomes a *femme fatale*, her unearthly presence driving him to extremes in defence of her name. A disembodied, beautiful voice haunts a composer in 'A Wicked Voice', and the picture of an old, oddly-costumed vagrant woman disturbs the calm soul of an American countess in 'The Legend of Madam Krasinska'. In each story we are shown an irrational enthrallment of the mind and drawn to wonder where derangement ends and supernatural influence takes over. (The sixth tale, 'A Wedding Chest', is more in the nature of a *conte cruel*, though it too derives from amorous fixation.) The collection is one to be savoured by all lovers of fantastic literature. It has the classic virtues: convincing, carefully sustained atmosphere; graceful and lyrical writing; and subtlety in the depiction of supernatural incidents. It should help bring Vernon Lee a new readership.

TIME OUT OF MIND - John R. Maxim
(Century, 1986, 502pp, £10.95)
Reviewed by **John Newsinger**

THIS IS NOT SCIENCE FICTION, FANTASY or, as the blurb proclaims, a rival to Straub's *Ghost Story*. It is instead a more traditional tale of the efforts of a rich American, Tilden Beckwith, to preserve his dynastic fortunes over the period from America's so-called Gilded Age to the present. It has all the usual ingredients: love, violence, wealth, greed, beauty, wealth, passion, hate and, of course, wealth. All very much the material of American soap opera, but Maxim gives it a powerful twist by telling the story through the slowly unravelling haunted imaginings of Jonathan Corbin, the modern day descendant of Tilden Beckwith and the instrument of his revenge.

The haunting of Corbin functions as a clever narrative device that holds together the two separate but interrelated stories of Beckwith and his great grandson. It certainly gives the book a degree of suspense and kept this reader turning the pages! In no way, however, does it really explore the notion of the supernatural and to describe it as a ghost story is quite misleading.

The Corbin story has him trying to understand the recurring memories of his great grandfather's life that are more and more taking possession of him. The urgency of this task involves not just preserving his sanity but also identifying people who are intent on murdering him and finally ending the Beckwith line.

The contemporary detective story is paralleled by an exercise in historical fiction: Beckwith's memories are a celebration of the era of Teddy Roosevelt, Jay Gould, J.P.Morgan and John L.Sullivan, all of whom appear in the text. It presents a romanticised view of this period of unrestrained exploitation, portraying it as a time when men were men, two-fisted, proud and bound together by unbreakable bonds of masculine bonhomie. Meanwhile women, it seems, were often ex-prostitutes. Maxim appears to regard the turn of the century brothel as a sort of private welfare institution whereby young women by diligence and hard work could accumulate capital for a new anonymous start in life. (Lord Young might care to investigate the viability of such schemes!)

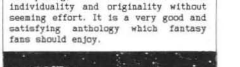
All in all a competently written, well-constructed novel. Good of its kind. Nothing to do with SF however.

IMAGINARY LANDS - Robin McKinley (Ed.)
(Julia MacRae, 1987, 246pp, £8.95)
Reviewed by **Helen MacNabb**

THIS IS AN ANTHOLOGY OF NINE FANTASY stories with a "particularly strong sense of location of the imaginary land each was laid in" which, the editor says in her introduction, is the theme of the collection. In that it succeeds. It also succeeds in creating a variety of completely different worlds, so much so that there is a sense of dislocation between each story. It would be better to read it in installments, to separate each story so as to savour it, rather than consecutively where the differences tend to be distracting.

'Paper Dragons' by James P.Blaylock - the first, and my least favourite, story - is set in a weird, misty Californian coastscape with strange creatures and odd people in an allusive, inconclusive tale. 'The Old Woman and the Storm' by Patricia McKillip is a folk tale with shades of other writers and legends in a gentle, evocative and lovely story with a perfect conclusion. Robert Westall's 'The Big Rock Candy Mountain' is located in Northwich and has filled me with a burning desire to visit it; nowhere, despite the author's claims, can be so otherworldly and remain in this world. Whether it is fantasy or ghost story, how much is true or false, I must leave to you to decide. 'Flight' by Peter Dickinson is clearly part of a larger history of Obanah, from the scope and detail included, but is complete in itself, with a clever twist at the end. 'Evian Steel' by Jane Yolen is a new angle on the Camelot story, a sidelight of something which might have happened when a certain sword was forged and a train of events was set in motion, gracefully told with implications subtle enough to raise goosebumps. 'Stranger Blood' by P.C.Hodgell also seems to be part of a larger canvas, focusing on a shadowy, embattled corner of a larger kingdom, with help from unlikely sources leading to a conclusion of hope and brightness. 'The Curse of Igamor' by Michael de Larrabetti is a folk tale of a monster horse and the retribution he exacts. 'Tam Lin' by Joan D.Vinge is a fairy tale where the glamour of faery is eventually rejected in favour of mortality and humanity. 'The Stone Fey' by Robin McKinley herself has a similar theme but shaped by different hands in a different world is a completely different story, with a delightful touch of added humour.

In all the stories, the writing and characterisation are excellent, the pacing, tone and colour create individuality and originality without seeming effort. It is a very good and satisfying anthology which fantasy fans should enjoy.



THIS IS THE WAY THE WORLD ENDS - James Morrow
(Gollancz, 1987, 319pp, £10.95)
Reviewed by **Jon Wallace & David V. Barrett**

LEWIS CARROLL, NOSTRODAMUS AND THE end of the world in a nuclear holocaust: James Morrow's new novel follows the successful style of *The Continent of Lies*, in treating a dreadfully serious subject with humour and a deft use of language.

The title is not, as one might think, taken from T.S.Eliot, but from

B O O K S

Robert Frost:

> Some say the world will end in fire,
> Some say in ice.
> From what I've tasted of desire
> I hold with those who favour fire.
> But if it had to perish twice,
> I think I know enough of hate
> To say that for destruction ice
> Is also great
> And would suffice.

The story of the end of the world - including a chapter "In which the Limitations of Civil Defence are Explicated in a Manner Some Readers may find Distressing", and I did - is told to a 14 year old boy by Nostrodamus in 1554. War is in the air. ICBMs, first strike missiles, offensive and defensive nuclear weapons of all descriptions proliferate. Scopas (Self Contained Post Attack Survival) suits are supposed to offer individual protection in the event of a nuclear war. George Paxton, a contented tombstone engraver, can't afford one for his 6 year old daughter, but is offered one free, in exchange for a couple of epitaphs and his signature.

The epitaphs read: "She was better than she knew" and "He never found out what he was doing here", and they reappear later. The signature affirms George's complicity in the nuclear arms race on the grounds that "the prevalence of these suits embolden our society's leaders to pursue a policy of nuclear brinkmanship."

The war happens. Mankind, except for George and five others, is wiped out. And in one of the strangest trials since *Alice in Wonderland*, the unborn, never-to-be-born, future inhabitants of the Earth accuse the six of crimes against peace, war crimes, crimes against humanity, and crimes against the future, "namely, planning and preparing for a war of extinction against the human species."

Morrow's characters present the arguments for deterence and disarmament with equal vigour - rare in a novel which is undoubtedly written as a savage indictment of humankind's monumental folly in pursuing Peace through Power and so bringing us ever closer to the destruction of planet and people. Don't expect a straightforward anti-nuke novel. Morrow's characters and situations are surreal, from the unborn Unadmitted to an obscenely crazy MAD (Mutually Assured Destruction) Hatter and a MARCH (Modulated Attacks in Response to Counterforce Hostilities) Hare, to a king-sized vulture. And in passing Lewis Carroll's riddle "Why is a raven like a writing desk?" is finally, and logically, answered.

Without the humour, though, it would be too dark and painful to read a book which contains the line: "My question is, why the fuck did you end the world?" Why indeed? [DVB]

GEORGE PAXTON IS A DEVOTED FATHER IN small town America. He is content except that he would like a scopas suit for his young daughter ...

> That's S-C-O-P-A-S, as in Self-Contained Post-Attack Survival.

A scopas suit will protect the wearer in the event of nuclear attack. George wants his daughter to have every chance, but his wife loses her job so the prospect of owning a suit vanishes until George is offered a free suit on the condition that he sign a document:

> SALES CONTRACT
> BY AFFIXING MY NAME to this agreement, which entitles me to receive one scopas suit free of charge, I hereby confess to my complicity in the nuclear arms race.

George is driving home, secure in the knowledge that he has done the right thing, when the unthinkable happens, the holocaust occurs. He is one of a handful of survivors rescued and taken aboard a nuclear submarine to Antarctica where they are put on trial for genocide.

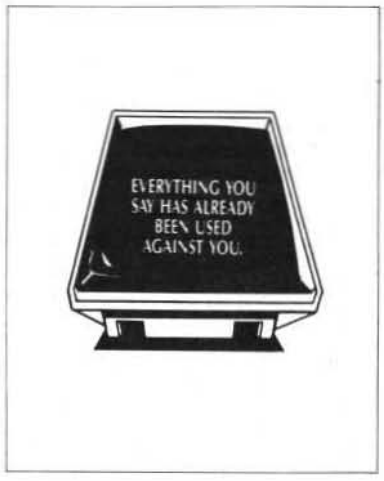
The book splits into three sections, the first where George's life is described, culminating in a horrifyingly real description of post-strike conditions in his home town; the second in which his fellow survivors (all of whom were engaged in one capacity or another in promoting nuclear war) attempt to explain the rationale behind their support for nuclear arsenals; and the third in Antarctica where George and the others are put on trial.

This is a complex novel written in a light style which belies its emotive content. Morrow uses George Paxton to stand for the man in the street, the man with all the muddled and half-thought ideas about what nuclear war is really about. The scopas suit is the technological equivalent of those idiotic 'Protect and Survive' leaflets Raymond Briggs showed up so well in *When the Wind Blows*.

The novel is easy to read, but extremely hard to digest, and I came away from it more worried about the hands on the nuclear trigger than I have ever been.

> "When is a first strike not a first strike?"
> "When?" asked Randstable.
> "When it is an anticipatory retaliation," said Sverre.

[JW]



THE DRAGON LORD - Peter Morwood
[Century, 1987, 318pp, £10.95]
Reviewed by Paul McAuley

LIKE MANNA (THE POWER TO MAKE MAGIC work in Niven's *Warlock* stories) the stuff of fantasy sems to wear thinner with every trilogy printed. *The Dragon Lord*, sequel to *The Horse Lord* and *The Demon Lord*, has to be a new nadir. As I haven't read the other two volumes I expected to find some puzzling references to past events and places in *The Dragon Lord*; what I didn't expect was to be quite unable to understand what Mr Morwood was trying to tell me in *this* volume. The text appears to be an unaltered first draft, and contains just about every fault an undisciplined apprentice writer can be capable of. Morwood describes the often inconsistent motivation of his characters by putting down the first thing that comes into his head, and usually the second, third and fourth too. Dialogue is impossibly stilted. Scenes are introduced which appear to have nothing to do with what preceeds or follows them (the prologue, for instance, or the description of an island blowing up as seen from a pirate ship, or a hideously coy guest appearance by Mr Morwood's mentor Anne McCaffrey). And the writing is turgid, bloated and (a cardinal sin in fiction of this kind) slow moving. Perhaps the oblique and muddled style is meant to reflect the uncertainties and ambiguities of espionage and statecraft; if so, Morwood hasn't the necessary skill to bring off such a conceit, and the resulting mess is as opaque as the fog which forms a motif of the text.

As far as I could understand it, the plot concerns the betrayal by a king of his agent while the latter is on a mission in enemy territory. As the enemy closes in on him, the assassin's wizard foster-father and the king's bodyguard ride off to his rescue, and a dragon, having freed itself from the wizard's power, also joins the search. Can the agent rescue the princess in the tower and save his honour? Can the wizard retrieve his spaceship? (Yes, spaceship.) Who cares? *Gor*(e) fans might get off on the gloatingly described mutilations and deaths (and a particularly nasty and gratuitous rape) but even they won't want to wade through the glutinous prose. Avoid.

THE COMING OF THE QUANTUM CATS - Frederik Pohl
[Gollancz, 1987, 243pp, £9.95]
Reviewed by David V.Barrett & Ken Lake

SHOW ME AN 'ALTERNATE HISTORY' NOVEL that I haven't read - and you've sold me a book. This form of SF appeals to me more than any other, for it gives

the author the chance to play that lovely old game of holding up a distorting mirror to our world.

Unfortunately, it also offers the author the chance to pull all kinds of tricksy gimmicks like having Nancy Reagan as President, as well as wasting pages and pages explaining the intricacies of binary arithmetic with tables showing how you pronounce 50 (110-010 is said "dye-pahtah" but who cares anyway?). And true to form Pohl pulls every one of these little jokes and, regrettably, spoils the story and bores the pants off the average discriminating reader in so doing.

The quantum cats are of course the ones that don't exist because they are black cats in the dark; the plot revolves round the breakdown of those barriers that keep each probability universe separate, and the ID comes from the trick of withholding information so that you don't realise that "going topless" refers to men in zipped-up enveloping swimsuits; "meter-ardesses" work on intercity trains, not aircraft; many crimes are punishable by the amputation of thumbs ... all the little hints that delineate an alternate universe for us.

And of course with the breakdown of the barriers comes the culture shock to our characters when they discover other universes and their own inbuilt prejudices and practices - it's an old gimmick but a perennially fascinating one so long as the reader can maintain some belief in the possibility of the author's invented alternatives. By and large Pohl keeps up the verisimilitude of his creations here, but the jokiness undercuts it all for it reveals his own personal political hangups, and heaves knows, the hangups of an American writer of Pohl's background and experience are pretty foreign to even the most Americanophile British reader.

Perhaps the worst thing about this engaging spoof is that the final universe we're left with, multiple personalities settle and flourish, most of us would find dull and uninspiring - a sort of hippy heaven where the kibbutz is greater than the sword and the greatest of US cities is no more than Hicksville on a wet Wednesday. But don't let me dissuade you - it's an engaging read so long as you don't take it seriously. It's fun that I read this six months ago in the US edition - and found I'd totally forgotten the plot when I received the UK hardcover for review. [KL]

POHL, UNLIKE ASIMOV AND HEINLEIN, IS still being creative, still producing well-written and enjoyable books. *The Coming of the Quantum Cats* is no great work of literature; it won't be graced with a Huge and Nebulous. But it's fun. I hope neither writer will be dismayed if I compare it with Bob Shaw's work.

The Quantum Cats (nicknamed after Shroedinger's Cat) are travellers between parallel times - some voluntary, others not. The story is told entirely in the first person - or rather persons: Nicky DeSota, mortgage broker, Senator Dominic DeSota, Major DeSota, Dominic P., Dr Dominic DeSoto-Arbenz and several who are other people.

The worlds they come from are also different. In one there's a pinko-liberal former film star called Ron Reagan (this must be SF!); in another, President *Nancy* Reagan. In one Jack Kennedy is still alive, though both brothers died in car crashes.

One of the IDs invades one of the others, with the idea of using it as a base to get its bombers and missiles to Russia, then zap them back into its own world for a surprise attack. The invaded USA doesn't happen to have any argument with Russia, and doesn't feel like being invaded. And caught up in the middle of it all, as ever, are innocent bystanders like Nicky DeSota. (Major DeSota heads the invasion force into the USA of which Dominic DeSota is a senator, while Dr Dominic is ...)

The international and national politics and their effects on everyday life and mores are well worked out in each world. The reactions of the various Dominics - and other duplicated characters - to meeting themselves are intriguing, as are their differences, and similarities, in character.

The little details which often raise the loudest chuckles: "There's an asimov called *The Intelligent Man's Guide to Quantum Mechanics*" a useful new collective noun for useless popular science backwords. Also look out for real people playing bit parts: I spotted British scientists John Gribbin and Stephen Hawking.

The thing I don't like was Pohl citing his own article 'On Binary Digits and Human Habits' (1962), reprinted in *Digits and Dastards* (1971). It he thinks I'm going to start calling 1984 "ooty-tee, too-pohl" (sic), he's got another think coming. To answer Pohl's question in his introduction to *Digits and Dastards*: "Wouldn't you like to be the first one on your block to count the way a computer does?" - No, thank you, Fred. Stick to fiction, it's more fun. [DVB]

THE FORGE IN THE FOREST - Michael Scott Rohan
(Macdonald, 1987, 408pp, £10.95)
Reviewed by Valerie Housden

SIX MONTHS HAVE PASSED SINCE THE siege of Kerbryhaine, when the Ekwash were defeated and the Mastersmith killed. Elof the smith, having recovered from his wound, is itching to travel east to find his beloved Kara. Ills the duergar princess is tired of being the butt of racist insults, Kermorvan is finding himself frustrated at every turn by the reactionary diehards in the Syndic, and Roc is bored. Thus the scene is set for a Quest, and our friends depart with the compulsory party of travelling companions. En route, one or two of these are killed off at regular intervals by Ekwash, river monsters, the Hunt etc., till at last they arrive at the refuge of Lys Arvalen in the forest of Tapiau'la, where all is not quite as it seems. Here matters come to something of a head, as Elof sets up the forge of the title, and using his arts enables the pals to escape the supposedly benign clutches of Tapiau, minus of course the rest of the company, and plunges them into further adventures for the second half of the novel.

Oh no! I thought when the book arrived, volume two in another sword and sorcery trilogy! The novel begins unpromisingly with a very stilted conversation setting the scene, and for a while one predictable set piece follows another. Dialogue, which in the earlier volume, *The Anvil of Ice*, was archaic and idiosyncratic, here becomes stiff and unnatural. The attempt to write the narrative in lofty prose often appears into unwanted artificiality, (his favourite adjective is 'fell'). And the appendices, though well written and amusing, are not really necessary.

Yet the book has a lot going for it. The plot has a number of unusual twists, although the climax is forseeable. The characters are allowed to develop as they progress. The menacing presence of the Ice as the real foe is maintained. The brooding atmosphere of the great forest is reminiscent of Tangorn, but the novel as a whole is nowhere near as derivative of *Lord of the Rings* as the earlier book seemed to be *sub-Earthsea*.

This second volume is *The Winter of the World* series, which unusually does stand alone, neatly ties up so many of the loose ends left in the earlier work that the reader is left wondering what the final book could possibly be about, except for Elof's provenance. There is also a hint that Kermorvan may become a tyrant. You would do better to purchase this for one of those evenings when there is nothing on telly and you fancy a good read.

THE BLACK SHIP - Christopher Rowley
(Century, 1987, 310pp, £10.95)
Reviewed by Barbara Davies

I RECEIVED *THE BLACK SHIP* WITH SOME trepidation because it is the middle book of a trilogy begun with *The War For Eternity*. Not having read the previous book it was difficult to catch up on the plot and characters. There are numerous strange words and outlandish names - how *do* you pronounce Bg Eva? - which made the task even more difficult.

Three plot strands make up this hard-SF novel, all connected with the Fundan clan of the planet Fenrille. The 19-year-old hero, Chosen Fundan, has spent his youth studying the ecology of Fenrille when his mother

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forces him to enlist as a space cadet. Circumstances lead to his being marooned in a hostile region of his home planet with a group of Chinese - the enigmatic Chi Lin Wei and her six clone attendants. They must battle with Nature for survival.

In the second strand Chosen's parents, Fleur and Lavin, are involved with battles of a different kind. The renegade Young Proud Fundan has returned with vengence in mind. With the aid of Neptunian fugitives from the eponymous Black Ship, Young Proud attacks the cities of Fenrille, looting their stores of Pharamol - a wonder drug with cell-regeneration and life-extension properties. Fleur is taken prisoner while Lavin tries desperately to defend the planet.

The final plot strand involves a being called the Divider. Trapped in a flask in a giant alien's laboratory the Divider must be rescued before it can act as deus-ex-machina and tie up the loose ends.

I tried hard to like this book. There are parts that are intriguing. The flora and fauna of Fenrille are detailed and convincing and the Pharamol-producing insects, Chitin, with their hives and strange hierarchy are fascinating. However, a major part of *The Black Ship* involves battles and tactics - a subject I find completely uninteresting. Also, the treatment of the captured Fleur by Young Proud is sadistic and distasteful- and surely unnecessarily detailed. The author seems to have a dubious view of women - they all come to an unpleasant end. As hard-SF goes this book seems par for the course, with all the attendant macho values.

Verdict: run of the mill hard-SF but with interesting overtones.

ISLANDS OUT OF TIME - William Irwin Thompson
[Grafton, 1987, 270pp, £2.95]
Reviewed by Maureen Porter

IT'S RARE THAT I STRUGGLE WITH A book, I've never failed to finish one I'm reviewing. This, however, has proved the exception. It describes itself as metafiction, but whilst the author shows in the foreword some grasp of the word's meaning, the novel itself shows no awareness of being a fiction of fiction. Or are we are to assume that he wishes us to understand that Atlantis itself is a fiction, in which case why didn't he just say so - after all, it is generally accepted that Atlantis is a myth, or at least, an inflated race memory of a sophisticated Mediterranean civilisation?

The foreword, in between claiming that a novel with characters and a realistic novel aren't the same thing (which could put novel writing back years), talks about this being a parody of autobiography, written as it is about a past life on a lost continent in a mythical prehistory. Don't swallow this nonsense. If *Islands out of Time* parodies anything, it's the standard Atlantis novel, about a disintegrating hi-tech society, and one man's fight to lead the people to a New Age, and it even manages that badly. The characters and dialogue are so painfully wooden it's embarrassing to read the prose; the philosophising and speculation on the nature of Man and Woman are so laughable it's a shock to realise Thompson expects them to be taken seriously. And the sex, there's lots of sex, described in beautifully detached and lovingly chaste detail. It reads like a sexual memoir, and he doesn't seem to know much about that either.

If you like pseudo-intellectual philosophical pornography, I recommend this highly, otherwise save your money. Thompson should maybe confine himself to being an 'acclaimed cultural historian', as the cover describes him, and leave fiction to those who understand it.

EVIL WATER - Ian Watson
[Gollancz, 1987, 200pp, £10.95]
Reviewed by L.J.Hurst

IAN WATSON'S VOICE IS ENGLISH, BUT the voices he uses in *Evil Water* are many. Similarly, his themes are both traditional and contemporary. A third strand to his work is his intellectual activity. And a fourth is the rôle played by the irrational or supernatural in much of his work.

A couple of stories are horror - 'Cold Light' is about a religious man driven to blind himself by the halo he develops, 'Evil Water' is about a man driven to murder his young mistress and the revenge her witch spirit takes on him. Four or five stories deal with attempts by psychotics to escape from or lapse into their psychosis (such as 'When the Timegate Failed' and 'The Wire Around the War'), while 'The People on the Precipice' is the opposite of a conceptual breakthrough, it is about constriction. But no story is solely an example of one strand of Watson's work - 'The Wire Around the War' is also about the world of Greenham Common, the Gulag and the White Train.

> Here in the real world outside the wire a mile is a mile. Inside, distances obey a 'negative exponential curve' - which means that whole bases and battlefields get compressed into a strip of space which we, from here, would only take to be a few yards wide ... As we head slowly around the wire the American base shimmers into a Soviet base ... maybe the next base is located in East Germany.

But the story ends in a supernatural mishmash of aspiration and loses its effect by ceasing to be SF.

'Skin Day, and After' is a satirical extension of single interest pressure groups and the effect they have (smoking days, no-smoking days, anti-fascist days, fascist days) but is rather too obviously exaggerated.

'When Idaho Dived' is a post-nuclear holocaust story about savages understanding or not understanding the technology of the past. 'On the Dream Channel Panel' and 'Windows' deal with people achieving access to other worlds. The first is comic and may simply be the delusion of a lunatic, the second is not.

The greatest story in this collection, though, is satire and little else - one of the most powerful Swiftian vision I've read - 'The Great Atlantic Swimming Race'. Swift's 'Modest Proposal' was about the starvation in Ireland, the Race is about Africa. Watson, again, adopts a persona to narrate this account of 1990. That persona is not aware of how crass and improper are the actions it describes, but because they are so probable (the persona is part of most of us) one reacts with anger to what is really an account of today. The world which can tolerate the need for Band Aid is sick indeed, and 'The Great Atlantic Swimming Race' drives home how sick.

Consider, though, some other features of this collection: for instance, how several of the stories relate to other works - 'Cold Light' has similarities to Peake's *Mr Fye*, 'When Idaho Dived' has a distant relationship to Stewart's *Earth Abides*, while the title of 'The Wire Around the War' echoes Cogswell's 'The Wall Around the World'. Yet what these echoes are intended to mean is unclear. I mean - 'Wall Around the World' is the story of a boy growing up, making the conceptual breakthrough/rite of passage that he is a warlock who can fly over the wall on a broomstick and doing so. If the theme that the title reference is meant to carry is that we can escape from a world in which the camps exist when we begin to conceive of the lack of need for them, it is reasonable, but it seems a most indirect way of doing it.

But I recommend *Evil Water*, 'The Great Atlantic Swimming Race' is a masterpiece.