VECTOR

142

The critical journal of the British Science Fiction Association

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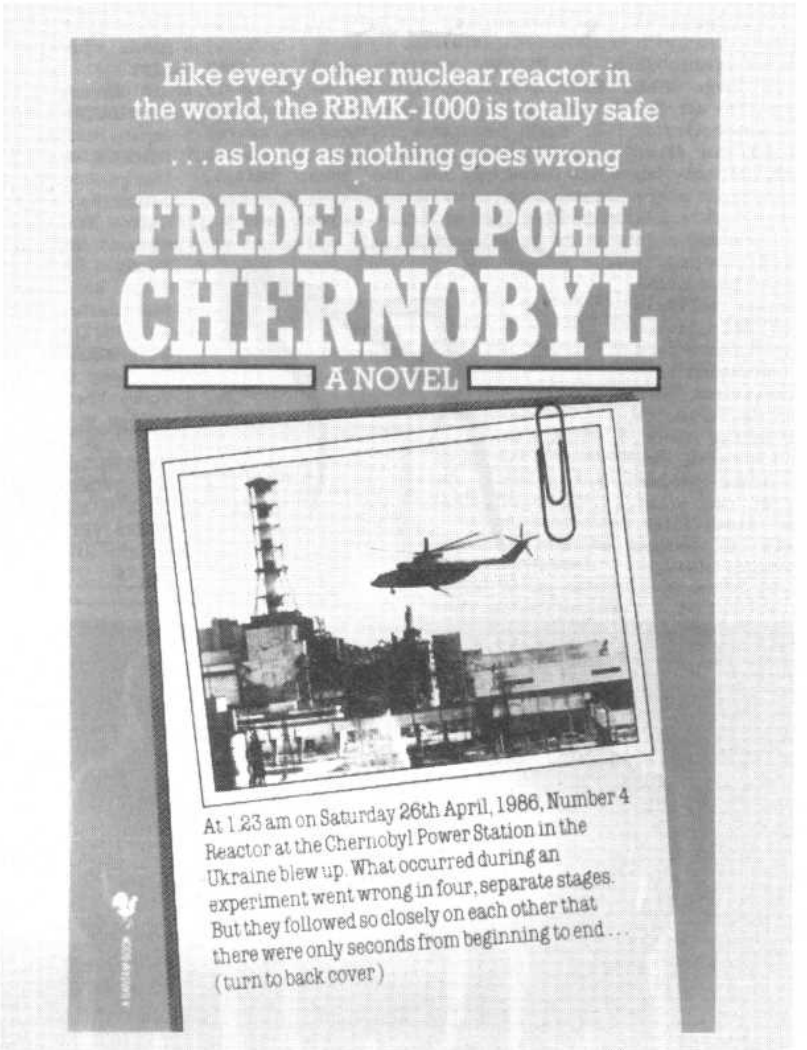

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FEBRUARY/MARCH 1988

C O N T E N T S

EDITOR **David V Barrett** | REVIEWS EDITOR **Paul Kincaid** | PRODUCTION EDITOR **Simon Nicholson** | PRODUCTION ASSISTANTS **David Cleden Sandy Eason Sharon Hall** | **ISSN 0505-0448**

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

THE BSFA: The British Science Fiction Association is an amateur organisation, formed in 1958, which aims to promote and encourage the reading, writing and publishing of science fiction in all its forms. We publish bimonthly: *Vector*, a critical journal, *Matrix*, a news magazine, and *Paperback Inferno*, a review magazine of the latest paperbacks; and triannually, *Focus*, a forum for writers. Other BSFA services include *Orbiter*, a postal SF writers' workshop; an *SF Information Service*; a postal *Magazine Chain*; and an *SF Lending Library*.
MEMBERSHIP costs £10 per annum (Overseas: $20 surface, $35 air). For details, write to: Joanne Raine, BSFA Membership Secretary, 33 Thornville Road, Hartlepool, Cleveland TS26 8EV. (USA: Cy Chauvin, 14248 Wilfred, Detroit, MI 48213.)

All opinions expressed in Vector *are those of the individual contributors and must not be taken to represent those of the Editor or the BSFA except where explicitly stated.*

CONTRIBUTORS: Good articles are always wanted. All MSS must be typed double-spaced on one side of the paper. Length should be in the range 1500-4000 words, though shorter or longer submissions may be considered. A preliminary letter is useful but not essential. Unsolicited MSS cannot be returned unless accompanied by an SAE. Please note that there is no payment for publication. Members who wish to review books must first write to the Editor.
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EDITORIAL

DAVID V BARRETT

WAY BACK IN 1980-81, KEV SMITH USED HIS EDITORIALS in *Vector 99-102* to explore literary criticism as applied to science fiction. We'll be doing a similar thing throughout 1988, examining the twin (but not identical) subjects of criticism and reviewing, focussing mainly on SF, but within the context of literature in general.

I'm kicking it off in this issue; Paul Kincaid will reply in *V143*, with the emphasis on reviewing. For the benefit of those of us who don't know post-structuralism from modern architecture, Mike Christie will will give us his Hitch Hikers' Guide to Lit Crit in *V144*. A couple of other people have tentatively offered to write articles for *V145* and *V146*, and I hope to wrap it all up in some way at the end of the year.

And you, of course, will have your say throughout the year in the Letters column.

Why devote so much attention to reviewing and criticism? After all, we all know what a book review is -- we've all read hundreds, and many of us write them from time to time. And lit crit -- isn't that best left to the ivory tower theorists in the universities? No normal person understands what they're talking about, so why not just leave them to it? Anyway, it's worlds away from what we do in *Vector* and *Paperback Inferno*, reviewing the latest SF.

Or is it? What do you look for in a review? A plot summary? Fine, so long as it doesn't give away too much of the story and spoil it for the reader. What else? "How good is the book?" Okay, but who says? The reviewer's judgement should certainly be part of the review, though it's not enough to say "I loved this" or "I loathed it"; if I'm not struck on Asimov, or have a passion for Delany, what's my opinion worth to someone with different likes and dislikes? (I might of course say "I love Delany's work but this one stinks," but even that, as an unsupported statement, isn't enough.)

That's not to dismiss subjective opinion altogether. You can't. In fact, it's vital for it to be in a review. A book is only black marks on sheets of paper unless someone reads it; *then* it becomes much more than that. The reading of a book is itself a creative act: the reader taking what the author has created, interacting with it, linking it consciously and subconsciously with his own feelings and memories of people, places and events, visualising it in his own mind, reacting to it emotionally -- and making something more of it.

So a book is different for every reader. So how can *I* tell *you* what it's like, whether it's any good? I can tell you about its effect on me, but unless you know me intimately that won't mean a great deal to you without some further explanation.

On the other hand, it's quite common for someone to say, "She's given it a good review, and I usually like the books she recommends." You get to "know" regular reviewers, finding that you habitually agree or disagree with their judgement.

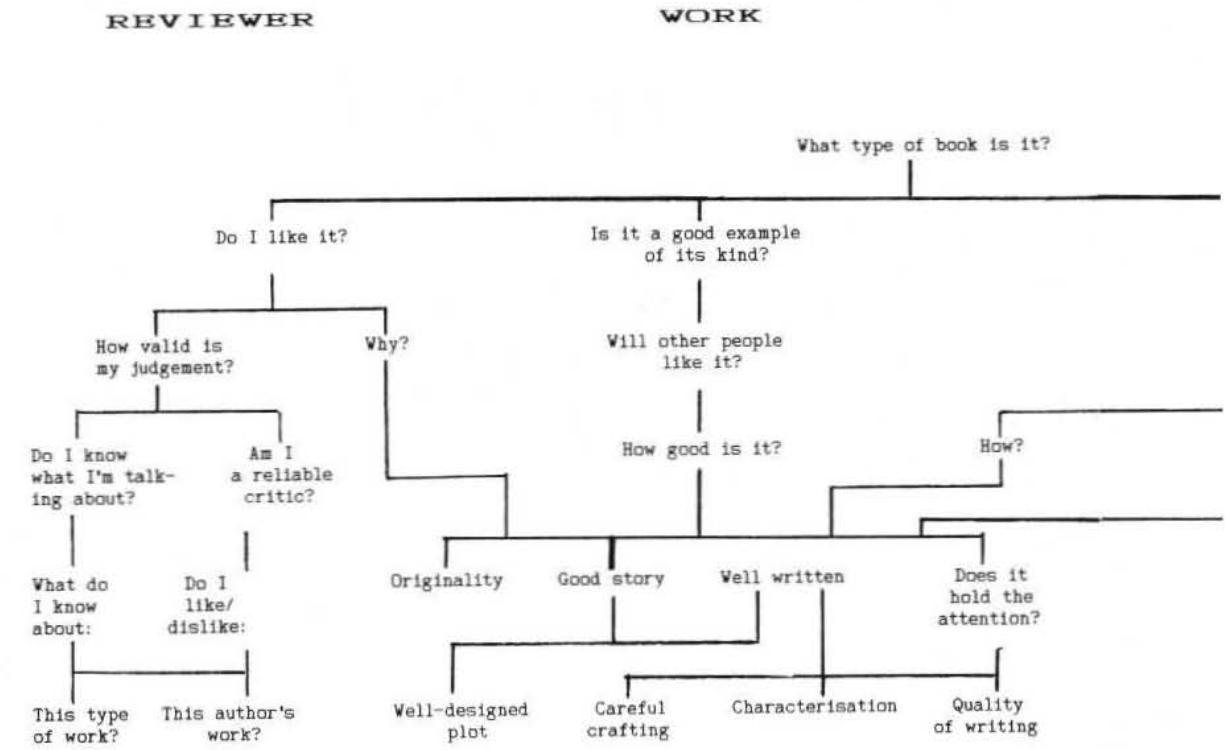
But subjective criticism isn't enough. There must be objective criteria as well, and this is where it begins to get complicated. I believe it should be possible to say "This is an outstanding work" or "This is drivel" as, to some extent anyway, a definitive, objective evaluation -- whether or not I personally liked or disliked the book. It should be possible to define "good" in the context of literary worth. But how? This is where we stray into the supposedly esoteric realms of lit crit.

THE DIAGRAM ON THE FOLLOWING PAGES IS MY OWN ATTEMPT TO outline in a coherent framework some of the thoughts that should be going through a reviewer's mind on sitting down to write a review. It doesn't claim to be complete, it doesn't claim to be a definitive statement, and I certainly am not saying that this is the only way of looking at it. To some *Vector* readers it will seem ridiculously over-complex; to others, ridiculously naive. There are whole schools of lit crit theory; there are massive tomes, university courses, professors and doctoral students by the hundred devoted to the subject. My diagram, while obviously influenced by what I have read, is not deliberately a distillation of any one school of thought. I constructed it to help clarify my own thoughts for this editorial. Paul Kincaid, as reviews editor, or any of our reviewers, would doubtless come up with something quite different if asked to do the same thing.

Note that I'm *not* saying that everything in the diagram ought to be in a review. What I *am* saying is that the reviewer ought to bear these things in mind when approaching a review.

I'm not going to step through it in minute detail; it should be fairly self-explanatory.

The diagram splits quite neatly into three sections: the reviewer, the work, and the author. *Vector* reviews usually concentrate on the *work*: the text, the plot, originality, characterisation, and so on; indeed, some schools



of lit crit argue that only the text itself is important. I've shown above that the *reviewer* is also important: for instance, does the reviewer know anything about sword and sorcery or horror or hard science fiction, or is he talking through his hat? Does the reviewer despise and automatically dismiss certain sub-genres?

The third section may need a little more explanation. Why is the *author* important? After all, we're not reviewing the author, we're not reading the author, we're reading a book written by the author. Surely it's the book, the work, that is important, that we should be concentrating on?

But the book must be seen in its context. The author, the author's world, and the author's own world-view are part of this context. (So are the policies of the publisher, the moral, political and economic climate of the country, the current flavour-of-the-month fashion in SF/Fantasy, and many other factors, but I'm trying to keep this slimmed down...) It's worth knowing (and saying) whether this is a first novel, or the first SF work by someone who normally writes historical fiction, or an early journeyman work by someone who has since become a respected SF author; it's worth pointing out if it's the latest in a series, and discussing how the author's ideas, approach and style have changed throughout the series.

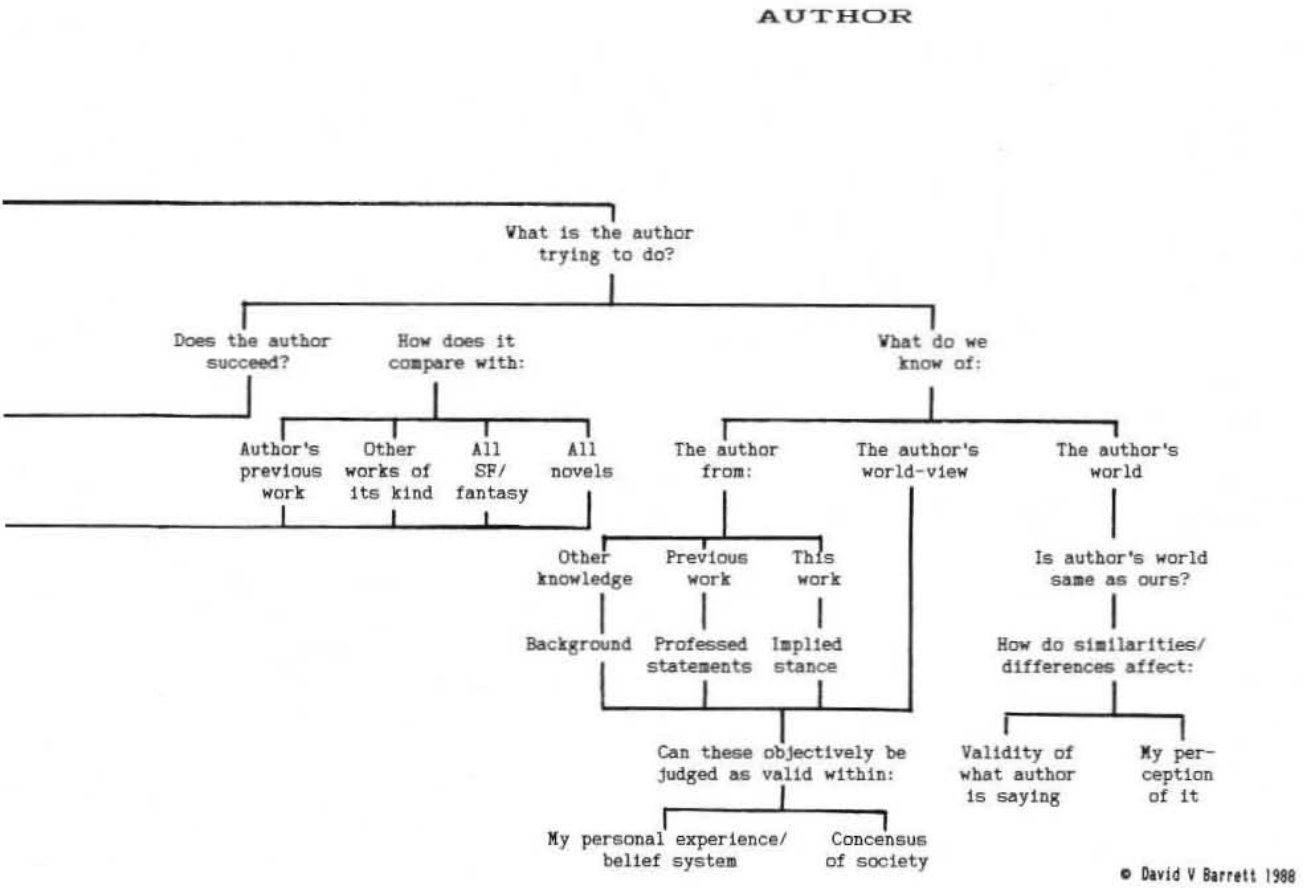
An historical perspective is also vital: was Swift writing simply an imaginative story, or a savage social satire? -- it makes a considerable difference to how we read *Gulliver's Travels*. Plenty of people have written SF about a near future, or animal fantasies. But why did Eric Blair write *1984* and *Animal Farm*, and why did he use a pseudonym?

It's not just historical. Knowing that Dean Ing has written articles in the American SF magazines about how to survive nuclear war provides a useful background to a reading of his fiction. Knowing that an author is an active supporter of Reagan, or Thatcher, or the CND, or the Workers Revolutionary Party can help the reviewer assess the degree of propaganda, or partisan polemic, or deep auctorial commitment, behind or within a novel. An author's stance may be apparent from the text -- but it isn't always. (This is why I have been careful to state my own position in previous editorials: not to influence or indoctrinate, but to give readers sufficient background knowledge to be able to assess *what* I say in the light of *why* I might be saying it.)

The same can be applied to, for example, SF from the Women's Press. Is the author simply writing an interesting story? Or is she deliberately making a political statement? Whichever, the reviewer's knowledge of (in this case) the aims of the publisher adds insight into the motivations of the author. Even if she is "simply" writing an interesting story, her background and her implicit assumptions about how the world works and how it ought to work will imbue her own work. If the reviewer is unaware of this the review will be written in a state of at least partial ignorance -- and will be a poorer review for it.

Not every point in the diagram will appear in every review; the usual *Vector* limit of 400 words makes this impossible in any case. But the idea is that these points should be *in reviewers' minds*, guiding their approach to writing reviews, rather than that they should step through every point in the list in their review.

If the diagram seems at all unbalanced, it is because the third area, the *author*, is the one we tend to consider the least, so I have given it a little more attention. The first area, the *reviewer*, should always be kept in mind; the reviewer should strive to maintain a balance between subjectivity and objectivity. The central area, the *work*, is the one we usually concentrate on the most, so I have merely sketched in a few details. This shouldn't be taken to imply that I consider it less important -- after all, a book review is primarily a review of a book. Some of the later articles in this series will no doubt expand on it in far more detail.



L E T T E R S

«THE TWO-PART EDITORIAL IN THE LAST ISSUE HAS PROMPTED considerable response. I don't want this to turn into a slanging match between Ken Lake and myself, or between either of us and the rest of the membership; I could take issue at great length about every paragraph of Ken's own letter, for example; but I'll make no comment on any of these letters beyond saying that many good points -- and some poor points -- are made on several sides. (As Ken objects to an editor editing, I won't even correct the one factual error in his letter.) Well-reasoned response to these letters will be welcome, but I'd rather the discussion didn't drag on beyond V143.

First, possibly unbloodied and certainly unbowed, Ken Lake replies to my reply to his "Right of Reply":»

I SUPPOSE AS A WRITER I SHOULD ADMIRE THE TRICKSY WAY you prefaced my article by its covering letter which, as you later stress, should have been marked DNQ. I don't admire it, any more than I admire your other trick of following my article with a longer and even less SF-orientated defence of your own stance.

When first I became the editor of a commercial hobbyist magazine, I was given two invaluable pieces of advice by the greatest editor in the field. Never, never, he said, permit your own personal predilections to colour your editorial writing or your selection of contributions, and never allow politics to enter into your pages because by their very nature they are not susceptible to reasoned argument.

The BSFA is a non-political organisation whose members band together because they share an interest in SF and its ramifications. Its publications should not, therefore, be devoted to non-SF-orientated subjects.

It is my contention that while reading feminist-orientated SF is a valid pastime for anyone who chooses to do it, being presented in an SF publication with feminist arguments in their own right is improper. And the same goes to any other aspect of politics.

You have made, in your own defence, the completely unacceptable claim that "politics is not about political parties, it is about life". Analogically, you might have said that "Abortion is not about babies, it's about free will"; the two statements are equally illogical and at base meaningless.

In quoting from a review of Michael *«sic»* Bradbury's brilliant parody ***Mensonge***, which superbly demolishes the philosophical systems on which Mike Christie's linguistic arguments are based, I did not -- as you claim -- seek to refuse to learn from Mike. I sought to show, pithily, that those arguments are fallacious.

In reading your list of what you regard as the functions of an editor, I was interested to see that you "summarise the remainder" having cut letters that "are too long", for on at least two occasions I have been attacked in the pages of BSFA publications (once certainly as a result of your cutting) for implying things which, had you not cut my text, it would have been obvious I did not suggest. Is that good editorial cutting, or did you decide that (to quote you again) you should cut me because my statements were "incorrect"? (As they concerned facts, that could not be so, surely?)

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I put it to you, and to your readers, that as an editor you have taken advantage of your position to misuse the pages of *Vector* by introducing your own political opinions, by printing them as if they were facts, and by admitting letters which (whether you approved of their arguments or not) also concerned politics and not SF.

I apologise to readers for having spent so many words in the previous issue discussing -isms, which might well be regarded as outside the strict field of SF. In no way am I attacking you or Mike (before somebody accuses me of that too) for your philological discursions -- I merely wished to make the point that the arguments were fallacious.

KEN LAKE
115 Markhouse Avenue
London E17 8AY

I'VE READ AND REREAD KEN LAKE'S "RIGHT OF REPLY" ARTICLE and find it confused and confusing... Ken manages to obscure the one valid point he's making ("valid" in the sense that it is a sensible point which is a basis for argument, rather than in the sense that I agree with it) with a smoke-screen of personal prejudice and half-truths; I had to read the article several times to discover exactly what his objections seemed to be.

I can only take Ken's expression "not only is this issue devoted to feminism" to mean that he feels that feminism has no place in SF, or writing about SF. By devoting an issue to examining the influence of feminist ideas on SF you are, it seems, imposing your own ideological framework (or "blatantly obvious prejudices") on the BSFA membership -- never mind the fact that the various bodies of thought which can be summed up by the term "feminist" are among the most influential ideas of the past couple of decades. Many writers have taken note of these ideas in creating their books, whether it be to preach social/political change or merely to write adventure stories with more forceful rôles for women.

Instead of actually criticising anything in the issue concerned, Ken merely abuses Mike Christie's article and adds an anecdote which really has nothing to do with it, except to suggest that discussion of theory -- particularly philosophical theory -- is something pretentious. (Why, then, the gratuitous reference to Kant's Categorical Imperative in Ken's review of Joe Haldeman's *Tool of the Trade* (*V141* p20)?) But first, Magritte's whole point -- in the painting of the briar pipe -- was to *be* absurd; secondly, there are no references to existentialism anywhere in Mike Christie's article, and third, *is* there a body of thought called deconstructism? (*Deconstruction* is a jargon term used by structuralist critics to describe a particular way of analysing texts; structuralism, by the way, has led to much pretentiousness and an incredible amount of bad critical writing but is actually a coherent if at times difficult system of analysis based on that good old-fashioned term "common sense".)

The only connection any of these points have with Mike Christie's article is that structuralism developed from linguistic theory, and the quotation, though mildly amusing, sheds no light on Mike's article apart from suggesting that Ken is unwilling or unable to deal with a piece which demands a certain amount of thought. I fail to see how appreciation of Suzette Haden Elgin's *Native Tongue*, so obviously based upon theories of linguistic and cultural perception, cannot be heightened by some knowledge of how these theories actually work in the context of the book. Of course, such an article may be inaccurate or ill-written, but Ken doesn't criticise it in these terms ("hyperserious waffle" could mean anything). He criticises its *existence*. Who is calling for suppression of discussion?

Ken's other main point -- his criticism of the political slant of your editorial -- is a point which perhaps gains some validity from the reported dissatisfaction of ex-BSFA members with political discussion in BSFA publications (the survey report, *Matrix 73*, pp12-13). My own answer to that -- added to what you have already said -- is that SF is an intensely political literature anyway. In deference to your plea for shorter letters I'll spare you a list of SF writers who have, in their books (and in many cases personally) taken stances for and against many "political" issues. I'll only cite one book reviewed in *V141* which appears to be about the arms race by a writer who "is the precise opposite of the Jerry Pournelle 'survivalist' war writer; his experiences in Vietnam, his wide experience of life in both east and west, and his academic background all contribute to create the most enthusiastic but open-eyed anti-war author in SF." Oh -- just a minute -- I'm quoting from Ken Lake's review again! Perhaps it's all right if we read about these issues but don't actually express any opinions about them ourselves? It's nice to know that the entire range of human experiences and relationships exists so that we can kill a boring train journey with a bit of escapism.

As for the individual points you've raised in your editorial (*V139*)... it's interesting that much of your post-Election scenario is *already* coming to pass. Before I sat down to write this I read that the amendment to the Local Government Bill outlawing the "promotion" of homosexuality has been passed. This leads to extremely worrying implications: will I be breaking the law if I give a 14 year old a book which does not make it clear that being homosexual is evil and disgusting? Will I, as a librarian, be able to supply books by -- to keep the discussion relevant to SF -- Samuel R Delany or Ellen Kushner (whose fantasy *Swordspoint* has the main romantic interest between two men) or will that be construed as "promoting homosexuality"? The *Spycatcher* case drags on and on, a farce in everybody's eyes: if *I* have access to two copies of the book, surely a KGB agent *must* be able to read it. The BBC has had even more pressure put upon it. Even if we restrict discussion to those factors which most concern us as readers and writers, it looks as though more and more constraints are being placed upon freedom of discussion.

I could, of course, bring in politics more specifically, and point out that the last Election showed a clear anti-Tory majority -- but you would be quite right to cut parts of my letter which...

Your editorial dealt with what I believe to be facts and outlined your own position -- *not* that of the BSFA. I find this entirely honourable. As with his attitude to articles which discuss SF from a feminist standpoint, Ken refuses to enter into debate about how far what you have said is true, and confines himself to denying your right -- and that of any BSFA member -- to suggest that our interests are affected by events which take place outside the covers of a book. As none of the points you made in your *V139* article were party political -- in the sense that many of the scenarios you sketched out could be (and have been) introduced by governments of all shades of opinion -- they are all points which BSFA members of all political viewpoints could be expected to think about.

I do not believe that BSFA members are as wilfully ignorant as Ken seems to wish them to be. I believe that they have a right not to expect BSFA magazines to be run as fanzines for whatever political parties and pressure groups their editors belong to, but that they have a right, also, to expect serious discussion of issues which affect them, both as "consumers" of SF -- the ideas and ideologies which have created the books they are reading -- and as, more generally, inhabitants of that future (or those futures) which those books suggest they will soon enter into. Furthermore, they have a right to expect lively and interesting discussion rather than sterile debating points... It's a pity Ken Lake hadn't written an article actually entering into debate rather than running away from any opportunity for analysis of the so-called failings of the viewpoints he attacks. The only conclusion I can come to is that he wants to gag a significant section of opinion, which is pretty ironic for a supposed defender of freedom of speech.

ANDY SAWYER
1 The Flaxyard
Woodfall Lane
S Wirral L64 4BT

KEN LAKE'S RESPONSE TO YOUR *V139* EDITORIAL WAS INTEResting. The danger of expressing personal views, even when clearly stated as personal, in an editorial of a magazine belonging to an association is, here, revealed. I feel that *Vector* editorials may be the wrong place to express personal opinion -- an editorial, after all, is designed as a column which reflects the aims of the magazine and the group which owns it, as a "lead" into the issue -- as a column which reflects *editorial* concerns, not personal ones. You may be "guilty" of a conflict of interest, between what you, as editor and representative of the Association, should rightfully be able to do in an editorial, and what you, as an individual, wish to say (in which case, you are not in your editor's shoes, so there are doubts raised about possible abuse of position). Opinion should be secondary and carefully couched within the limitations set by the column (Editorial = that written by David Barrett, *Editor*, not David Barrett, *just another BSFA member*. I mean, BSFA members have to use the Loccols, they can't use the editorials, so why should you?) If *Vector* was your own personal fanzine, and not the BSFA's, then you would be free to say what you want, as an individual, within the editorial, but *Vector* isn't. The point is, not that you expressed what you as an individual thought and felt (and I generally agreed with it), but that the editorial was the wrong place to state it. Solution: next time, make a separate article of it. There are a lot of people out there who will continue to confuse you, the individual, and you, *Vector* editor, even if you do clearly and repeatedly state the difference, as you did. Ken is an example.

TERRY BROOME
101 Malham Drive
Lakeside Park
Lincoln LN6 0XD

I WOULD LIKE TO COMMEND YOU ON YOUR RESPONSE TO KEN Lake. To print his article in such a prominent position, prefaced by his nasty little accompanying letter and followed by your answers, is probably the best way to turn his tactics back against himself. Your response just about said it all. A large amount of SF & F is written from a feminist perspective and another large amount is written from a highly sexist perspective. Articles about both are as deserving of space as features on any other category of SF & F -- the issue devoted to children's fiction is an excellent example. This pathetic episode has ruined whatever credibility Ken Lake had as an SF commentator and anything I read by him in the future will be tainted by his underhand tactics.

KEITH BROOKE
84 Bade Road
Norwich
Norfolk NR3 3EJ

KEN LAKE'S RIGHT OF REPLY, I MUST SAY, REALLY WAS UNpleasant reading, mostly because it is didactic, uses a lot of propaganda tricks, and smugly puts all those who are struggling with the -isms of the modern world into the position of encouraging "the rest of us" to be tolerant. I especially found offensive the equation of an editor's "left-wing" political stance with a lack of even-handedness, as if there was a political stance from which one could be more even-handed (or does he just mean a stance from which the bias would be invisible to him?). I suppose that he is aware of speaking full-square from within that great invisible -ism, conservatism, and that his position is strong because there are many of him about. I personally read SF to get away from the certainties and absolutes of that sort of attitude.

Having said that, I must agree with him about the "tendentious left-wing assertions". Listing a selection of "facts" about one's society works like a series of buzz-words, with the underlying attitudes left completely unexamined. I do not believe you did the subsequent articles a service by placing them within such an overtly political frame. They stood very well as thoughtful and sincere feminist critiques of SF which need to be answered in their own right without discussing Thatcherite Britain. Perhaps Mr Lake would not agree with me on that. Perhaps he feels that having a feminist issue at all is evidence of unforgivable political bias?

If I were to institute some sort of with-holding of fees for space that one felt had been misused, I would withhold my 8p for the two pages that you spent on this subject. Perhaps you feel virtuous for having turned the other cheek to what I can only describe as "terrorism" on Mr Lake's part; instead you have displayed a preoccupation with political matters, and an editorial insecurity, that I for one neither share nor particularly want to know about. You should have sent Mr Lake's article back to him and saved us all a lot of earache.

CECIL NURSE
49 Station Road
Haxby
York YO3 8LU

KEN LAKE MADE SOME AMAZINGLY SWEEPING CLAIMS IN *V141*, attacking the editor, a contributor, and my own view of the relevance of literature/art in our culture. So let's take those three points in the order in which Ken presented them.

Censorship: Ken appears to consider himself the victim of selective political oppression by exclusion. Well, he put his head in a noose of his own knotting by "daring" the editor not to publish, and will hopefully now have the grace not to complain if he gets a little bit lynched.

Of course, I have no idea how many tens or even hundreds of Ken's letters and articles have been systematically suppressed, but in my three years of membership of the BSFA his name is one of the half dozen that I've come to know best. Generally I even agree with what he writes -- his *V141* contribution emphatically excepted -- and since I class myself as centre-left, was very surprised by his villification of David Barrett's expressedly *personal* views. Well, personal views are permitted and published, aren't they -- including Ken's. The only trace of censorship I detect is Ken's desire to disallow views which diverge from his own.

Hyperserious waffle: Mike Christie's article on Elgin's *Native Tongue* (*V139*) was not "hyperserious" but in fact a major simplification of an exceedingly complicated book which makes explicit use of complex and subtle ideas. And I am *not* criticising Mike for simplifying. He had no more than 3,500 words to work in, and was writing for a non-specialist audience. When I had occasion to analyse *Native Tongue* some time ago, I had the twin luxuries of far more space, and of writing for an audience well versed in both formal linguistics and the philosophy of language. Mike's skill in picking out the central theme of Elgin's argument is extremely valuable and informative, and I am especially grateful for his pointing out the significance of Gödel's Theorem in the book, a factor that I'd undervalued in my own reading. Gödel's Theorem appears to be Elgin's attempt to justify the device she employs of falling back on *language magic*, i.e. the casting of spells: merely talking about things in Láadan will supposedly by mysterious Whorfian processes transform the world. Elgin is wrong, of course, and the counter-argument was actually published in 1973 by Ian Watson in *The Embedding*.

Ken's accusation that all this is hyperserious waffle, and his coupling of this with an open detestation of all those -isms he hates to hear about, seems patently two-faced. Ken may or may not be self-educated, but you can tell from his style that he's no fool. He must know he's propounding anti-intellectualism, a "posh" word which means: "let's all crawl back into the cold and dark at the dead end of the cave, and drop any pretence of being distinct from the rest of the animals." He's employing relativism when he insists on evaluating any set of ideas in terms of its overlap with his own preferences rather than by testing against any objective or at least concensus reality. He's also applying a little deconstructionism, and making a complete hash of it, in his garbled attempt to consign functional paradigms (Ken's -isms) to some sort of conceptual limbo of irrelevance. If all that sounds as though I don't agree with his reasoning, well what I really have trouble with is his motivation. What moves him to get upset when a detailed analysis appears

L E T T E R S

in *Vector*? Has he never read its subtitle: *The Critical Journal of the BSFA*?

Politics: Ken wants no politics, but only SF in the BSFA. How does he want to separate the two? Everything that is published, or screened, is a statement that enters the public arena. Every statement, if it is to be comprehensible, makes use of shared knowledge in the form of explicit and implicit assumptions, and if it is to be meaningful, it attempts more or less consciously to reinforce or modify the recipient's perceptions and thus influence the recipient's subsequent actions. Every statement is an attempt, one way or another, to steer events in the culture in which it is uttered. *Every* statement in every interaction is therefore a political act. The often heavily encoded statements contained in a work of prose fiction, which enjoys an audience of thousands of recipients, is a large-scale political act.

This is why any form of literature, including SF, is *relevant* and worthy of serious attention. This is why I took a degree in linguistics and literature. This is why I am a reader and why I am a writer. If Ken Lake doesn't like living in a cultural space and doesn't want any part of society's communication with itself, he's at liberty to withdraw. But he might appreciate a friendly warning that about the only uninhabited islands left are bleak little specks on the fringe of the Antarctic. But then a hermit's life isn't supposed to be much fun, is it?

DAVID MACE
Lancashire

IT HAS BEEN BROUGHT TO THE ATTENTION OF ONE WHO HAS THE honour to address you by the perpendicular pronoun that there has been, in the columns of *Vector*, an exchange of letters on the subject of censorship of ideas and views between yourself and a Mr K Lake. I should have thought that for you science fiction chappies, little green men and bug-eyed monsters would have been more appropriate, but then we live in changing times. Besides, one can never tell for whom the little men, of whatever hue, and the monsters, no matter what their state of opthalmic distress, may be working, can one?

I have been made aware of the correspondence by a fellow whose employment as a Whitehall teaboy I can neither confirm nor deny (under Section 2) but who, in the event of his existence, would be a member of the BSFA.

It is clear that in the well-ordered and democratic society towards which we are all, so to speak, striving, such epistolary divisiveness and controversy should not occur: especially under an administration whose stated aim, in 1979, was to replace discord with harmony. We at this Department have taken this idea very much to heart, and are drafting regulations which should remove such economically useless and time-wasting concerns from your already over-burdened shoulders. I enclose a declassified and sanitised excerpt for your information and perusal:

> In the case of the editorial content of printed matter which (in line with the Act) shall have been deemed to be classified a sanctioned *publication*, any exchange of "views" which arises from comment on or criticism of the registered editorial interest-profile shall be classified *ultra vires*, and such exchanges of views shall be placed in a public repository for a cooling-off period yet to be specified, or until one or more of the persons whose legitimate interest has been filed in triplicate shall have been removed from the sphere of operation by imprisonment, certified insanity, act of God or agency of Government. This process having been undertaken, a public warning will place the duty of *caveat emptor* upon the prospective purchaser. The interest-profile of a *publication* (*v. sup.*), once registered, will *not* be changed unless it be by a two-thirds majority vote of a quorate assembly of the shareholders. The purchase of such a *publication* will register the purchaser electronically as a licensed reader of the *publication* with whose editorial interest-profile he is most compatible. It will also register him as a shareholder, and hence fully liable to the projected information tax.

Thus it will be seen that such unproductive controversy as that in which you are currently engaged need not, in future, arise. Our Press, like the BBC, will then be a model of clarity and the envy of the world.

(You will note that the male pronoun is used as, strictly *entre nous*, a measure is being promulgated to limit female education to domestic science skills; this will no doubt be to the satisfaction of your correspondent (*v. sup.*) Those who are so intellectually ill-found as to fail to comprehend the meaning of such terms as *ultra vires* should not, in any case, be troubling the rest of us with their inconsequential views, as I am sure you would agree.)

If you publish any of the above, I shall deny it, of course.

SIR HUBERT APRICOT KCMG CBE
Whitehall
London SW1

«In addition to the current controversy, V139 itself is still generating letters. First a comment from Keith Roberts on the reviews of his books in that issue:»

I RECENTLY READ WITH GREAT INTEREST YOUR REVIEWS OF MY novel *Gráinne* and the accompanying poetry collection.

Contrary to general belief, I've always had great respect for critics and feel they perform a vital job. This of course on the understanding that they do that job seriously and responsibly. *«See editorial in this issue.»* Dipping the pen into virulent though generally ineffective acid, or parading some short-lived political spite, doesn't do a sight of good to anybody.

Vector, as the current offerings show, has generally steered a sensible middle course. To Helen McNabb I would merely say that though she puts her finger very accurately on the strength and weakness of the book it's less easy to see what to do about it. Having just spent some time preparing Philip K Dick's *Valis* for its outing from Kerosina I couldn't help being struck not by similarities of style and treatment but by an overall structural resemblance. (The book was unknown to me at the time of writing *Gráinne*.) M John Harrison of course did something not dissimilar with his *Centauri Device*. It may be that by giving my fantasy legs I gave myself

L E T T E R S

extra problems, or perhaps the other writers were simply more adroit at stepping around the pitfalls; but I remember being conscious during the writing of the danger of spelling things out too far, of dotting every *i* and crossing every *t*. On first reading *The Hound of the Baskervilles* as a very small boy I was bitterly disappointed at finding the spectral, terrifying Hound was really just an oversized mutt with phosphorus around its lughoies; and though my admiration for Conan Doyle has remained profound, to this day the book still isn't one of my favourites.

KR-86

With regard to the relationship between Gráinne and Kaeti, I don't think I've ever consciously tried to create an "ideal" woman; the notion smacks of arrogance to say the least. But Helen may well be right; so I'll put a point back to her. Due to the infinite vagaries of publishing, *Gráinne* was actually written a couple of years before *Kaeti*; so if there's a progression, it's Kaeti who's the culmination. In view of her very kind and perceptive comments of 18 months ago, I wonder if Ms McNabb would go along with that? Kaeti certainly would!

The review of *A Heron Caught in Weeds* gave me one of those rare moments of genuine pleasure that I think most writers, except the most incurable of egomaniacs, sometimes experience, but that they don't talk about because it's corny. I don't know Garry Kilworth or his work, though I'm starting to catch up on it a little; but there does seem to have been a definite "flashover" between us. While the Introduction was to a certain extent tongue-in-cheek I was genuinely unsure about the collection, never having offered anything like it before. That Garry has picked out not only what I feel to be the strongest piece in the book, but the strongest line in it, would seem to indicate that the exercise wasn't wholly a waste of time.

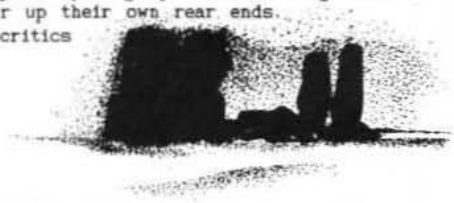
In my ideal world, criticism should take the form of a dialogue between originator and commentator. It's refreshing that, courtesy of *Vector*, this still occasionally happens.

KEITH ROBERTS
Amesbury

I REALLY APPRECIATED THE LAST TWO ISSUES, DEVOTED TO feminist and children's SF/Fantasy, both issues dear to my heart.

Unlike other correspondents I, to my misfortune, *have* read several *Gor* books. I started when the first few appeared in the 70s; fairly mild affairs where the treatment of female slaves was condemned by the protagonist who admired the equality and spirit of free Gorean women. However -- and I forget the title of the book but it occurs when the hero is enslaved while travelling through a marsh -- there is a sudden reversal, a complete character change in effect. From then on, free women suddenly become frigid "castrating bitches" who need to be raped, tortured and degraded to transform them into their true selves -- panting "hot slaves"; basically "woman as bitch on heat". I read on in disbelief, thinking this some temporary aberration, just a sick joke, then began noting down some of the worse examples in the succeeding volumes, intending to publicise the pernicious attitudes spread in the books. However, I became so sickened -- I think the final straw was a scene where a woman is shut up for days in a tiny box to break her spirit and crawls out covered in excrement to lick her master's feet (and we're told how much she loves it) -- that I abandoned the planned article and threw the lot out.

Incidentally, Norman was interviewed in *Fantasy Voices 1*, edited by Jeffrey M Elliot (Borgo Press, 1982). "John Norman" talks very much in the same rambling, long-winded, self-opinionated manner as the lectures in his books, "proving" everything by circuitous arguments which disappear up their own rear ends. He dismisses critics



as being envious of his sales, afraid of new ideas, desiring to control SF, and even says he wonders about their "sanity and moral character"(!). In himself, he's a pathetic bore; unfortunately the vast sea of woman-hating propaganda he's unleashed shows no sign of abating. This is the "acceptable face" of the hard porn, kiddie porn, snuff movie spectrum from the man who blows his own trumpet about the sterling service he's doing for SF.

PAM BADDELEY
1032 High Road
Chadwell Heat
Romford
Essex RM6 4BA

«For anyone who's not read any John Norman novels and wants to satisfy their curiosity: please don't let this publicity encourage you to buy one new, so adding to his royalties; there's plenty of the garbage around second-hand. But my advice would be don't bother.»

I THINK THAT SHARON HALL IS WRONG TO COMPARE THE RESults of an archæological dig to those of linguistic analysis. The resemblance is no more than superficial: like language, archæological finds have a history, interrelations between different forms across periods of time. But where archæology continually exposes the past in a concrete manner, linguistic analysis obscures clear thinking and precise knowledge, leading to argument about words instead of matters of substance. Language is an instrument and what matters is what is done with it.

Physicists, for example, don't spend their time debating the precise meaning of terms like "light" or "energy" -- they mostly leave them undefined. Yet the most accurate and extensive knowledge we possess is in the physical sciences.

As for cyberpunk -- I find it significant that some people react so strongly against suggestions that it does exist. Ultimately what do they care, so long as the

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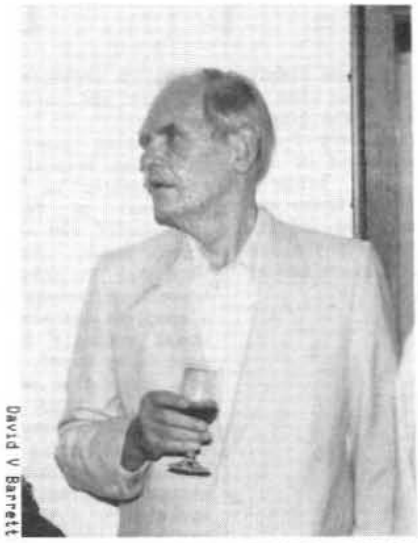
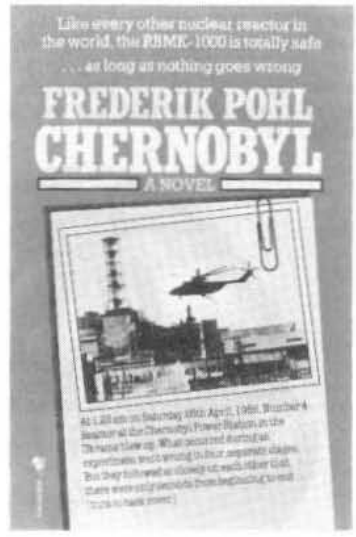




FREDERIK POHL

INTERVIEWED BY DAVID BARRETT & MARY GENTLE

Frederick Pohl must surely rank in the top three of anyone's list of the most influential SF writers this century. Towards the end of last year, Pohl reached his 50th anniversary as a writer. He also published an outstanding fictionalised documentary, *Chernobyl* (Bantam, 1987, 355pp, £4.95). David V Barrett, with Mary Gentle, interviewed him at the Worldcon in Brighton last September.

HOW DID YOU COME TO WRITE CHERNOBYL*?*

Ian Ballantine made me do it. He called me up a few weeks after the accident. Ian's an old friend of mine; he's published more of my books than any other living person. He's not now a publisher, he's a packager, and he's done a good many books that are not science fiction. He called me up and he said, "Remember the books that you wrote for me years ago, that were keyed to current events of one kind or another" -- books mostly with Cyril Kornbluth, one was called *A Town is Drowning*, and was about a hurricane hitting the northeastern United States; because both Cyril and I had been hit by a hurricane, and we wanted to get our own back a little bit; and another called *Presidential Year* about a campaign -- and I said, "Yes, I remember them very well, but they didn't really do all that well did they?" and he said, "Well now I want you to write a novel about Chernobyl, and it will do much better." And I said, "Well, that sounds good, because of course everybody in the world is fascinated with Chernobyl, but I've got a lot on my plate already and I don't know if I can; there's no point in doing it five years from now. And I really have contracts that have to be completed."

I'm amazed at the speed you got it out.

It amazed me too. I don't usually write that fast. I mean, I write reasonably rapidly, but I do a lot of rewriting, and I need to allow time... I don't know if I could have productively used much more calendar time; I could have used more sleep, because I did work long hours.

My wife and I had been invited to come to Moscow in June, six or seven weeks after the accident, for other reasons; I'd been invited to be an observer at the eighth Congress of the Union of Soviet Writers. This was something brand new in my experience, because usually they haven't wanted any outside observers.

So while I was there I took advantage of the opportunity to talk to a lot of people about Chernobyl. In fact I didn't have to bring it up, because everybody there was talking about it. What astonished me at the Congress of the Union of Soviet Writers, was the way in which people got up and denounced everybody in sight -- it was very much like a science fiction convention business meeting! The administration was denounced for corrupt things and fraudulent things and non-elections and one-slate elections; the government itself was denounced for Chernobyl... there's been a lot of consternation about it

David V Barrett

in the world, because a nuclear disaster changes the environment for everybody. They were saying all these things, as well as denouncing censorship, and the fact that some famous Soviet writers were non-persons; their books were not in print. And this is the sort of thing often heard in the Soviet Union, but only whispered in the ear when nobody else was around.

Is this a result of glasnost?

Exactly. It has to be. And then, as a matter of fact, Mikhail Gorbachev himself sat in on one of these sessions. It astonishes me; it's as if Ronald Reagan had come to the Science Fiction Writers of America. Gorbachev took his seat with some of the officers and writers and sat there and listened for six hours or so. And I think he may have learnt something because, in fact, there have been changes in policy of the exact kinds described, indeed advocated, in the speeches. Well this was all startling. I'd been in the Soviet Union before... One of the reasons I wanted to write the book was to find out how Soviet society was changing.

There is a major political sub-plot in the book; several of the characters wanted to return to the good old Stalinist days.

There are many people who do. There are a good many people in the Soviet Union who liked things quite well when Stalin was around. [And some are] too young to remember the Stalin years. But they're all being educated. Even in the Soviet Union there is a lot now being published that's never been published before about the Stalin years. All the children are bought a big book on the Soviet Union [telling] exactly about the Stalinist era...

Then I talked to people who had visited Chernobyl -- journalists, and so on -- and I talked to some people who had not been connected in any way with these things -- people I knew unofficially... Anyway, I just had to write the book...

Detail and Accuracy

I'M IMPRESSED BY THE TECHNICAL DETAIL AND ACCURACY OF the book.

It's the best I can make it. Ever since I finished writing it I've been watching all the reports that have come out in *New Scientist* or *Scientific American* or the newspapers or whatever, and there've been some television films on it, and I've talked to people who've been there since I was, with my fingers crossed, worrying that I got something terribly wrong, or that something has happened to upset some of the things I said. So far I've been lucky.

The guy who reviewed the book for New Scientist *is the journalist who's done all their reports on Chernobyl; I gather he's amazed at exactly how accurate it is.*

I don't know if I should say this, but I got a lot of my information out of *New Scientist* -- so I'm not surprised! Actually, I've been a subscriber to *New Scientist* almost since it existed, 20 years ago, and it's one of my main sources for scientific information.

Did you know the current editor of Scientist, *Mike Kenward, used to edit* Vector *for the BSFA in about 1970?*

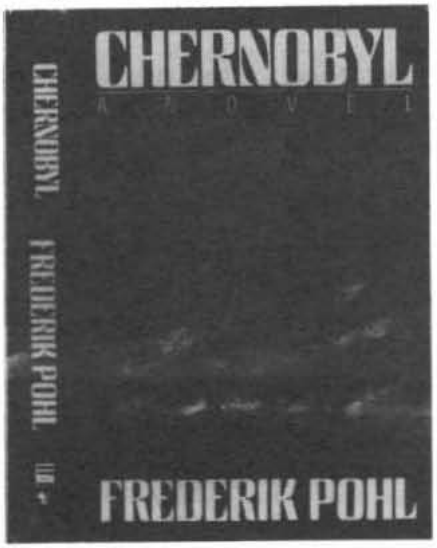
I didn't know that. I thought they all had a healthy attitude! But, I'm not a scientist, it's a spectator sport for me. So I subscribe to *New Scientist* and *Scientific American*, and I belong to all sorts of things, I'm a Fellow of the British Interplanetary Society, and of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, and I'm a member of about a dozen others, and I get all these things and read them for fun -- and *New Scientist* is the most fun reading in the lot. It's not always the most profound reading -- there are other sources where I can get somewhat more detailed information: the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists in America* was very good in covering the basic technology involved at Chernobyl -- but it is one of my main sources, and always has been.

Did the Soviet authorities know that you were researching and writing this book?

They encouraged me; at least they did after a while. I'm not exactly sure when they decided to permit it. As soon as I got back from Moscow, a year ago in June, I realised that although I was able to find out just about everything I needed to know about the technology, I'd never been in the Ukraine, I'd never been in Kiev, and the Ukrainians are not quite the same as the Russians, although they're very similar; it's more or less like the English and the Americans, you know, they're enough similar so that they fight a lot, disagree on many things.

But I wanted to know how the people lived, and I wanted to talk to people who'd actually been there, to get a sense of what it was like to be there, what they felt, what was going on in their heads, what little details that I might not have been able to invent, that should go into the book. So I wrote letters to everyone I could think of in the USSR. I wrote to the Union of Soviet Writers; I wrote to the heads of some of the News services, whom I had met; I think I wrote a letter to Gorbachev too, I'm not really sure about that; I wrote to the Soviet Embassy in Washington, everyone else I could think of. And a few weeks later I began getting anonymous packages from the Soviet Union, with reports and newspaper clippings and things like that; no return address, I don't know who they came from. Half of them were in English and half in Russian; the Russian was not a lot of good to me because I don't read or speak Russian, but I did have all of the Russian material I acquired read over by somebody who speaks it, and he picked out the important parts for me.

And then I got a cable saying -- I'd asked for permission to come back and do the research on this -- saying Okay, come ahead. Unfortunately right around that time my wife got ill, she had a heart attack, and it was



FREDERIK POHL

David V Barrett

pretty chancy for a while; she's just about completely recovered now; but it really did put a crimp in my daily activities.

What's her name?

Elizabeth Ann Hull. She keeps the name Hull, not Pohl; I told her that after we'd been married five years, if she's been a good girl she can take my name... That isn't exactly why she chose to do it! She's a university professor, so she keeps her own name. But I did go, in the beginning of December, and the Soviet Writers' Union made all the arrangements for me; they arranged for me to meet all sorts of people. I must have interviewed, I don't know, 40 or 50 people, including some who were not scheduled, some I knew in other ways, unofficial sources of information, and some that I just chance met on the spot.

Did this include people who'd actually been involved in the accident?

Oh yes. It did not include any of the people directly responsible for it or who were in the control room at the time of the explosion, and the reason for that is that all of those people were either in hospital or in jail. As you know, some of them have been put on trial now, and have been sentenced. It did include people who lived in the town of Pripyat, who worked there, people who'd been evacuated, people in the Ministry of Nuclear Energy who'd been dragged out of bed an hour and a half after the accident to jump on a plane and get down there and see what the hell had been going on, and firemen who had fought the fire, and doctors and journalists, all sorts of people. I did not get to the reactor itself, I wasn't allowed to visit the power plant, or the town of Pripyat, both of which were off limits at the time. I went to Kiev. I did go into the evacuated zone, and I saw some of the people who'd been evacuated and so on, but they had not finished entombing the reactor in its concrete sarcophagus.

Incidentally, is the play *Sarcophagus* running in London now do you know? I'm going to try to see it. I have a script of it, but I haven't seen it performed. I met the author of it, by the way, a wonderful man, he's the science editor of *Pravda*, and he had been writing what he intended to be a film documentary on the hazards of the nuclear power industry in the Soviet Union, when the phone rang and he heard about Chernobyl, so he just turned the page and started writing a play.

Safety -- and Death

WHAT ARE YOUR OWN FEELINGS ABOUT THE SAFETY OF NUCLEAR power? You have a line in the book: "Like every other nuclear reactor... it is designed to be totally safe. And it is, so long as nothing goes wrong."

Well that's exactly it. It's perfectly safe. There are many things that can go wrong that still can be dealt with. The RBMK series, the graphite-moderated reactor of the kind that blew up at Chernobyl, does have a few very worrisome problems. It has what's called a positive void coefficient, which really means only that at low operating temperatures it can go wild, which is what happened. But the engineers who designed the plant knew this as well as anybody else, so they designed in half a dozen safety systems so that it would automatically shut down if it started an excursion that would lead to something like that. And this is true, I think, of the technology in every major country anyway as far as their nuclear power stations are concerned. The technology takes account of the dangers involved. It's the idiots who run them that terrify me. In Chernobyl they turned off the safety systems. In America they've done equally thoughtless or even malicious things.

I've been to Windscale a couple of times, and to Dounreay, I've done a few articles on them, and yes, they have tremendous safety systems, but hell, I worry about them.

Well, that's exactly what I worry about. I worry about people shutting off the systems because they're inconvenient, or because they want to try something that the safety systems endanger, or simple stupidity like the man in America who went looking for a leak in the insulation with a candle and set fire to the plant in Brown's Ferry; or maliciousness: there was a New York State power reactor where an ex-employee was somewhat unhappy after being fired, I think, and came back and set fire to it, arson, and he did something like $10 million worth of damage to the plant, but by pure luck it did not happen to make it dangerous to the world around it.

The two accidents in France that you mentioned towards the end of the book, are they both accurate?

As far as I know; I usually did not use anything that was not reported in two separate sources, and I believe I had two separate sources for those, though I don't now remember what they were.

(NG) Maybe I missed it in the book, but I didn't see any figures for the actual death toll up to date.

Well the death toll varies, you know, because people keep dying. As I understand it, the latest official count of direct deaths is 31, but I believe there are four or five more that I have not seen reported. I'm told that the two most recent deaths were a director and a cameraman on the first Soviet television crew that went in to cover it, who have finally died of radiation.

(NG) But presumably a lot of it won't show up until future years have gone by.

Well, it depends on what you consider a Chernobyl death. The ones that the Soviets are counting are the ones who received massive doses of radiation, or physical injuries, burns or whatever at the time, directly attributable to that. There also are a large number of people, and the number is anybody's guess, who will die of cancer, or who will be born deformed, or something like that, over the next 90 years or so. No-one can really give the numbers for that because we haven't got the experience. But one of the minor advantages to have come from Chernobyl is that the Soviet Union and the UK and the United States, and a lot of other countries, have a joint plan for following up the survivors over the next century: there will be something like 150,000 people who will be checked every six months until we're all long gone. And then our descendents will know a little better than we what the consequences are.

Humour

THERE'S QUITE A FEW RADIO ARMENIA JOKES IN CHERNOBYL; *I love those, and they have the mark of genuine Russian jokes. You've written a lot of humorous work; I've recently read* The Coming of the Quantum Cats, *which was great fun. How important is humour to you in writing?*

I don't think I could face the world any morning if I couldn't think of something comic about it, it's too frightening otherwise. And the Russians are very big on

jokes, jokes against themselves, jokes that say things that, at least until *glasnost*, they couldn't say out loud in any other way. I heard all those jokes in the Soviet Union, I didn't make any of them up; I think one of them I heard from a Russian outside the Soviet Union, all the others I heard in Moscow or Kiev.

I think my favourite is about ordering a car, and it'll be ready in 20 years time...

The Russians, the Ukrainians, all the other people in the Soviet Union, are not really that much different from us. They know very well that their system is not producing for them what the Western world is producing for its people, and they're quite cynical about it. But what astonishes me is that there are in the Soviet Union people exactly like my character Simyon Smin, who know all the flaws of the system, and work within it and get the job done anyhow, when it would be just as productive for their own lives to simply coast the way so many others do. But there are some traits in human beings which cause them to do more than they really have to to survive. I find that one of the most hopeful things to look at in the world today.

David V Barrett

Pohl & Kornbluth

I UNDERSTAND THAT YOU'VE REWRITTEN SOME OF YOUR EARLIER books that you did with Cyril Kornbluth. Why is that?

The principle reason I did was because Jim Bain, who has published the revised versions in America, asked me to. He was a great fan of the collaboration team, and of Cyril's work in general. He's tried publishing some of it, some of Cyril's own work, and hasn't been able to get it the attention that he wanted for it. So he thought that if I did major revisions on them it might help attract more reviews or something like that -- which was a reasonable ploy, and I was not unwilling to do it because some of the books I thought needed revision. There were two in particular, *Search the Sky*, which we wrote really very quickly, and I think we finished it in something like eight days, which is only one more than God took to make the Earth; and the other was our last book, *Wolfbane*, which Cyril had just finished doing his final revisions on it before he died. And I thought both of those needed some tightening up, there were a lot of joints that were missing that I thought needed to be filled in. So I was quite willing to do that. I have not changed any of them in any basic way, but in those two cases in particular I have done a lot of what I would do in final polish of any book, but didn't do at that time. The frightening thing to me, though, is that nobody seems to notice the differences [laughter]. There are big lapses in logic in *Wolfbane* in particular that do not appear, but nobody seems to care; now that I've put them in they don't seem to feel any better about it either.

I've read a few critics who believe that your collaborations are better than your solo work; how do you feel?

Well we were collaborating as novices in the field of book-writing. We'd done quite a lot of writing independently, but our first books were ones we wrote in collaboration. That's not quite true, because Cyril had done another book in collaboration with Judy Merril before we did any of them, in fact I think he'd done two. But we were still learning what we were doing, and I think at that time the two of us together were better than either of us. But that's a long time ago, and if Cyril had lived, he was beginning to write his own books, three or four he was on by that time, and he had great plans for the future, and I think that no-one would say that of his work if he had lived to write any more of it. And as to my own work, I think that the collaborations were far better than the novels I was writing by myself at that time, but I think since then I've done better.

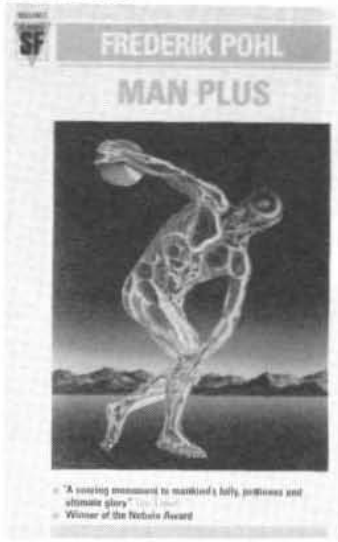
Artificial Intelligence & SF

LOOKING AT TECHNOLOGY AND SF, HOW DO YOU, FOR EXAMPLE, see the future of artificial intelligence, and its benefits and its dangers, and what's the rôle of the SF writer regarding AI?

The SF writer may already have played his rôle, because it's science fiction that's responsible for AI; the real earliest pioneers in artificial intelligence, like Marvin Minsky, the great guru of AI at MIT, began as kids as SF fans, and the sort of thing that appealed to him when he began doing his graduate work, even before the Institute for Artificial Intelligence at MIT was formed, was to try to program computers to do the things that robots had done in science fiction stories. He made a great effort to program Isaac's Three Laws of Robotics into a computer, found out you can't do it, at least not in the way described, but in the process of trying he learnt a lot about what artificial intelligence could or could not be, at least at that time.

And I think that probably science fiction writers are continuing to challenge a lot of kids who grow up to be Marvin Minskies, and try to make computers autonomous machines, to do the things that we describe. How far it will go in the real world I don't know. I'm not really terrified of enemy robots, you know, deciding to revolt against their human masters and take over the world. I don't regard any artificial intelligence machine as anything more than a tool, but it can be a very sophisticated tool; it can supplement a lot of things that human beings would like to do.

FREDERIK POHL



Cyberpunk

(MG) HOW WOULD YOU SEE THE CYBERPUNK VIEW OF THE MACHine as dehumanising people?

I think people dehumanise themselves the whole time, probably they'll find new ways to do it all the time. This world we live in is in a sense dehumanising. We're not very much like our remote ancestors who never bathed or combed their hair or cooked their food or so on; and in that sense we're less human than they are, but I think it's an improvement, and I think probably the impact of artificial intelligence on the lives of ordinary people will be an improvement.

I can imagine that the cyberpunk notion of implanting a little black box in the head that will help you think or remember or make decisions faster, would be very appealing; if I could buy one now I would do it. I don't think it's really going to change people's sense of self, or their desires for what they want of their lives.

How do you view cyberpunk?

With some loathing actually. It's not the cyber part that I disapprove of, it's the punk part. What I dislike about it is that in most of the books that are acclaimed in cyberpunk there's no-one I can root for, and everybody in it is somebody that I really quite a lot dislike. I've been accused of contributing to the starting of cyberpunk with books like *Man Plus* and short stories like "Day Million", and I'll plead guilty if I have to. But it's not the subject matter that troubles me, it's the way in which the humans are dehumanised. I think that's a false view of what the future of the human race is like. If it's a true view I don't want to hear it!

Right Wing US SF

AMERICA IS STILL PRODUCING RIGHT WING TECHNOLOGY-ISwonderful SF, people like Larry Niven and Jerry Pournelle, and right wing boy-scout-initiative SF -- Dean Ing and David Brin. I believe you've been a lifelong Democrat; how does the right wing aspect of a lot of American SF affect you? How do you feel about it?

It bothers me that people should think that they believe some of the things they say, when they can't possibly believe them. But the reassuring thing about that is that I know Dean Ing and Jerry Pournelle and Larry, and all those other people quite well, and I don't really believe that their dream of utopia is significantly different from my own. It's only the strategies for getting there where they are so wooly-headedly wrong, you see.

Particularly one Dean Ing article I read, about making an air filter for your nuclear fallout shelter out of a couple of baked bean cans and pieces of string, and so long as you keep your scout knife in your pocket you'll be okay.

Dean does tend to talk like that. He's really quite a rational human being in person, and we're pretty good friends; he's a good man; he just happens to be totally off base in this respect. As I've told him. He asked me once to write a cover line for a book on nuclear war shelters, and I said I would only do it if he would print the cover line exactly as I wrote it, and what I wrote was that in the event of a nuclear war, what Dean proposes is your best bet, but you would be a hell of a lot better off if you disarmed all the nuclear weapons to begin with. And he published it.

Do you see any significant differences between US and UK SF?

There are different varieties of SF, and I suppose that some of them are more clearly emphasised because of national differences, although they really are not that significant. But the New Wave, for example, I would have thought of as primarily a British innovation, 25 or 30 years ago, whenever it was.

But have we learnt anything from that?

Oh yes, we've learnt a lot from it. But even at the time of the New Wave there were people like Judy Merril, who is now Canadian but is US born, and Harlan Ellison who hardly ever goes out of the United States, and is about as American in outlook as anyone can possibly be, who although they tended to deny it, as did everybody else in the New Wave, were clearly members of it. And I think that in the same way most of the schools of science fiction don't have geographical sources, they're just the way individual people tend to find it possible for themselves to write. Now, science fiction writers as a class are pretty independent minded, not to say obdurate. I used to be President of the Science Fiction Writers of America, and trying to get any three science fiction writers to agree to anything is like herding mice, because they go off in their own directions all the time. I think that this is true of their writing too.

How do you see the state of SF today, compared to 20 or 30 years ago?

It's broadening, and the margins of it are getting less clearly marked. It's hard now to know whether something is meant to be science fiction or not. There are so many bestsellers that are not marked science fiction...

Is this good or bad?

It's all right. I don't mind. There are people who would like not to be labelled as writers of science fiction, quite a few of them; they either want to be called writers of speculative fiction, or just writers; and that's fine too. I don't mind their own personal oddities. But

as a matter of pragmatic use the label "science fiction" is very good at indicating that part of the bookstore where the books that you might want to read might be, and so I don't really care what the label is attached to it, I just want people who want to buy my books to know where to look for them.

50 Years of SF -- and Still Going Strong

YOU'VE BEEN WRITING AND EDITING SF FOR NEARLY 50 YEARS..

Actually just 50 years right about now. The current issue of *Amazing Stories* has my first professional sale reprinted in it; it appeared in October 1937 and they've reprinted it in their October 1987 issue.

We'll look out for that.

Don't, it's terrible. [laughter] It's a poem.

That's a tremendous achievement, a tremendous contribution to the SF world. Looking back over half a century, what do you feel is your greatest achievement...

Surviving!

...your most significant work, or your favourite work, or your best work.

My favourite novel varies from time to time...

...and your best is presumably always the one you've just finished?

At the moment I think my best may well be *Chernobyl*. But the one I come back to most frequently is *Gateway*, which I think did really just what I wanted it to. And it was a difficult book to write. I think the reason that I choose *Gateway* over almost any other is that I don't think anybody else could have written it. It's a book that *I* wrote, that I don't believe any other writer in the world could have written. There are other books that have done pretty well -- *The Space Merchants* for example, or *Man Plus* or a few others -- that I think somebody else could have written. But that's my baby, *Gateway*, that's the one I'm willing to have engraved on my tombstone.

You've just done a fourth Gateway *book,* The Annals of the Heechee. *Is that the final one?*

Yes. Of course I always say that.

What next?

Well, I've got another science fiction novel that is completed; it will be out in America in early spring next year. It's called *Narebedla Ltd.* It's Aldeberan spelled backwards actually. I hate to tell people what it's about because they give me such peculiar looks: it's about a bunch of weird aliens who kidnap opera singers... Then I've got two or three other science fiction novels that I'm in various stages of preparing. There's a collaboration with Jack Williamson called *Land's End* which is also finished. And there are a couple of others I'm writing.

I have the firm intention at last to finish, to actually write a book that I've been sort of working on, on and off, for 25 or 30 years, which is a novel about the Great Depression; it's not science fiction, although it'll be written in the same sort of way as *Chernobyl* or many of the others. I've been accumulating notes for it, as I say, since Christ was a corporal; I don't remember when I decided to make a novel of it, but I originally thought of it as a non-fiction book; and I have a quarter of a million words of notes, and something like 50,000 words of text of what would have been the non-fiction book, and now I've got another 10 or 20,000 words of notes and scenes and chapters for the novel. But I haven't shown it to anybody, so I don't know who's going to publish it or how delighted they're going to be with the prospect.

So that's the next major project.

I think so. Unless Ian Ballantine calls me up again.

I'm glad he called you up last time. Fred Pohl, it's been a great pleasure talking with you. Thankyou.

LETTERS **continued from p.10**

fiction produced aspires to, or even reaches, the highest standards of excellence? And it doesn't matter what SF authors of the 80s (you too, Sharon!) write -- if they are intent on doing their best possible work, they need have no fear of repeating the moves of Delany and Ballard, or even Gibson and Sterling. The corollary is, of course, that we'd be very foolish to discount or ignore those writers or their works.

MIKE COBLEY
18 Athole Gardens
Hillhead
Glasgow G12 9BA

KEITH BROOKE'S COMMENT THAT "CYBERPUNK" EXISTS, THEREfore it exists, doesn't really say anything. "Cyberpunk" is a term created by authors and critics to describe a certain kind of work, or rather -- *to market a product.* I would like a list which describes what makes certain kinds of SF cyberpunk and what not, a list of differences. The term cannot be applied to works written before its conception ("proto-cyberpunk" maybe, but then we're just compartmentalising for the sake of it). It isn't a term, but a *movement*, I hear you argue, but where are the signs of it? Whenever I come across it, it is as a term used by critics, not as a movement, except originally, when three or four writer friends told everyone they were starting a "cyberpunk" movement and then did nothing but plug themselves and each other by calling their works by the *term*. There followed the usual bandwagon full of opportunist writers and publishers. Now it is used by critics.

Why does cyberpunk have its roots in Dick and Doc Smith? Perhaps Keith could enlighten me as to what distinguished their work from all others set in highly industrial future worlds. Stylish writing? -- hardly Doc Smith's *forté*. Ideas? -- so Doc Smith was impressively more inventive than other writers ahave been to date? The use of technology? -- but isn't SF, in general, about that? I thought Dick wrote about the nature of reality and questioned the *universal* truth of our perceptions. And Doc Smith was one in a long line of gosh-wow space-opera writers on military/fascist themes, and escalating wars -- hardly an in-depth exploration of the effects of future technology on mankind, more a background, a plot device, for violence on an increasingly grand scale. As children we're impressed by the scale, unaware of the violent overtones, but isn't this cowboys-and-indians in space? I've not yet read any Bester.

Didn't many authors object to being labelled "New Wave"? Can't anyone read or write stories these days and let them stand for themselves, rather than fudge their worth, or lack of, by compartmentalising them (for no apparent valid reason)? What happened to objecting to the ghettoisation of SF? Aren't we now encouraging it?

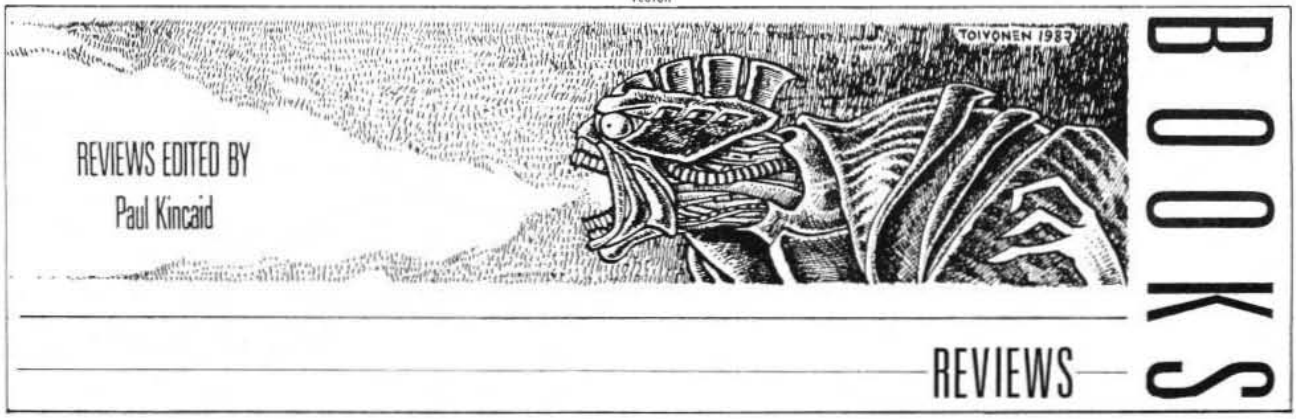
TERRY BROOME

IAN WATSON'S *THE POWER* RECEIVED NEGATIVE REVIEWS IN THE December issues of both *Vector* and *Paperback Inferno*. Fair enough -- I haven't read the book, so I wouldn't know. But right at the end of his *PI* review, Terry Broome slips in the comment that "I don't like most horror stories"; similarly, in Michael Fearn's review in *Vector*, the book merely "confirms [his] stance as a lifelong non-reader of horror". Hmm. Little wonder that they both describe the book as "sick" or "sickening". Perhaps, out of fairness both to Watson and to anybody who might be influenced by the reviews, the book could be looked at again by somebody more sympathetic -- if a reviewer starts out convinced that a book is "the type of book I would emigrate to avoid" (to quote Michael Fearn) there can not be much point in going any further.

KEITH BROOKE

«I agree to some extent; see my editorial this issue. But I've sometimes had my preconceptions overturned when forced to read for review a book I wouldn't normally touch with a barge-pole...

Several letters have had to be held over due to lack of space, including more on Ken Lake, more on Gor, and a very detailed response to LJ Hurst's article in V141 about the Judge Dee books. At this rate we'll need a Vector letters supplement... Thanks to all.»



FANTASTIC VOYAGE II: DESTINATION BRAIN - Isaac Asimov
(Grafton, 1987, 392pp, £10.95)
Reviewed by Chris Barker

I'M AFRAID THIS IS NOT A VERY GOOD book. Before I attempt to justify this rather unpromising statement I ought to fill in a few background details which explain, in part, why I think Asimov had failed even before he put pen to paper. *Fantastic Voyage II* is not so much a sequel as a remake of the original novel which, of course, was a novelisation of the screenplay. Asimov, who had no control over the original screenplay, decided he could do a better job if he started the concept again from scratch. So he has loaded the odds against himself before he starts, simply because the treatment is in no way original.

The plot has strong echoes of its previous incarnation: a group of scientists are injected into the body of a VIP. In this instance they are Russians (with one exception) and their intent is not to save the life of the subject, but to capture his last thoughts as he lies dying in a coma, thoughts which, it is hoped, will contain further dramatic revelations about the process of miniaturisation he has invented. The exception is Morrison, a kidnapped American scientist despised in his native country, who has a computer program with the potential to unlock the brilliant Russian's mind.

The first section concerns the Russians' kidnapping of Morrison and their attempts to persuade him of the feasibility of miniaturisation, before showing him any real evidence. It is also, I suspect, Asimov's thinly disguised effort to persuade his 'gentle' reader of the concept's plausibility (I remain unconvinced). The second section concerns the exploration of the brain of the comatose scientist, with Asimov introducing an added dimension of miniaturisation to the atomic level. I found this the best part of the book though it suffered, as did other sections, from reading a little like his popular science articles in *F&SF*. There is, of course, a twist at the end!

With the possible exception of *The Incredible Shrinking Man*, which in any case was more metaphysical in aim, I think the best approach to miniaturisation is a humorous one. Go and watch *Inner Space* and leave this current novel in the shop.

THE TOMB OF REEDS - Sarah Baylis
(Julia Macrae, 1987, 174pp, £7.95)
Reviewed by Denise Gorse

THIS IS A JUVENILE FANTASY SET SOMEwhere in Ireland's Celtic past, at a time when the beliefs of the old and new religions were intermingled, the figure of St Brigit, for example, being revered both as warrior goddess and Christian saint. The story's heroine, the willow-gatherer Bridey, was named after Brigit, and after discovering a battered golden crown on a riverbank begins to feel a strange affinity to the goddess. The book describes her quest to save her people from a pointless and destructive war with their neighbours, a war that will continue until Briget's lost crown is returned to the legendary Tomb of Reeds. Bridey is joined on her quest by a young bard, Canola, and the developing friendship of the two girls - initially somewhat hostile to each other - is a major theme of the novel. Baylis writes in a style which is simple and clear, yet manages to address such complex issues as the illusory glamour of war and the hold this has on men's minds. *The Tomb of Reeds* is strongly anti-war, and feminist in its sympathies, men being portrayed as not so much evil as weak, easily led, stirred to irrational bloodlust by a heroic song or the sight of the King's men on horseback. There are a few sympathetic male characters, but they are relegated very much to the rôle of helpers: the strong characters in this book - the poet Liadan, to whom Canola is apprenticed, the Abbess Fionnuala - are all women. For this reason alone I suspect *The Tomb of Reeds* would not appeal greatly to young male readers, but girls would perhaps respond more positively to what is a rather female-centred but also thoughtful and well-told tale.

THE FORGE OF GOD - Greg Bear
(Gollancz, 1987, 474pp, £11.95)
Reviewed by Tom Jones

THERE'S NOTHING SF WRITERS LIKE MORE than destroying the Earth (surely there's a PhD for some sociology in that somewhere?) and Greg Bear is no exception. There's nothing wrong with using traditional plots if you can bring something new to it. I had high hopes of this book for, although I've not read any of Bear's other novels I know they've been well received.

By its nature this plot produces hard SF and that is true of this book but the style borders on what I call Hi-Tech (currently a popular way for authors to write near - often very near - future SF without having to call it SF). Some of the traits of Hi-Tech are lots of pages, several associated plot lines and politics; this has all of those, the main thing it lacks is the torrid sex scene.

Bear combines the aliens-invade-Earth plot with the destroy-the-Earth storyline; indeed it's the aliens who wish to destroy the Earth. Added to this, a second set of aliens perform the function of the US cavalry. Both are artificial intelligences, proxies for their makers.

The "baddies" employ diversionary tactics and the characters' reactions to these take up a large part of the book. It's this that I find difficult to accept. The way the aliens actually attack the Earth (and it's a very interesting way) we have no defence against, so why bother diverting us? And don't tell me it's alien psychology it's just illogical.

Similarly I'm not too sure about the "goodies"; what they do is all towards a particular end, or so it seems to me, perhaps I'm naturally suspicious. Another thing: we're led to believe Earth isn't the first planet to be attacked, so where are the representatives from the other planets helped by the "goodies"?

Finaly on the debit side, some of the plot lines start off very strong then peter out. Perhaps that's the way life is but it's very annoying in literature.

On the plus side the book has good science and it's interesting to see geology get prime spot. The description of Yosemite National Park is good too. The writing is also crisp, no frills, and rolls along; I can understand Bear's popularity.

I could have liked this book if I could have believed the plot but I'm afraid that is asking too much.

B O O K S

DAWN: XENOGENESIS 1 - Octavia Butler
[Gollancz, 1987, 264pp, £10.95]
Reviewed by L.J.Hurst

DAWN IS THE FIRST VOLUME IN A PROPOSED trilogy, *Xenogenesis*. Set after a nuclear war has devastated most of the Earth, it begins with Lilith going through a series of Awakenings aboard an alien spaceship orbiting beyond the moon. Over two hundred years have passed since she was rescued and during her long hibernation she has been cured of cancer and her genotype modified to remove her family tendency to cancer.

Aliens, so long in interspace that their home planet may no longer exist, have rescued her. Vaguely humanoid in shape but covered in tentacles, with two sexes and a third neuter, Lilith takes some time coming to terms with them and their purpose in holding her. Under Oankali guidance Earth will be repopulated by modified humans, starting with teams of forty placed in the Amazon jungle. Lilith has been chosen to lead the first group. The aliens are not disinterested benefactors, they are gene traders, and this is just one stop on their trading journey.

The final part of the book deals with Lilith awakening the group, also rescued from Earth and introducing them to their future life. Those who reject resettlement will stay onboard the ship when it travels out of the galaxy, subjects of relatively humane experiments.

I would not want to go back and I would not want to stay. *Dawn* is intensely depressing. The writing seems low-spirited. The life to which Lilith adapts seems not much better than life on Earth must have been or will be, and the writing seems to reinforce this. Olivia Butler seems to rouse no interest in describing the alien-ness of the alien ship (actually a plant) and its inhabitants. The aliens have a high technology, mainly based on living things like Harry Harrison's *West of Eden*, but my reaction, rather than interest or wonder, was a sort of queasy repulsion which moderated the boredom. Lilith, the aliens, the Awakened humans, none of them are interesting or even admirable characters.

This is a book with overtones (not every novel has a black woman, studying anthropology after her husband and son have died, who has been rescued from Macchu Picchu, and has the name of Adam's first wife, as a protagonist) but they contribute very little. Perhaps their significance will grow in the following volumes, but overall I doubt that this story of the development of the successors to humanity will rival *Last and First Men* in incidents or ideas. Like some evolutionary failure to become a bird or angel it fails to take off, let alone soar.

BEST SF OF THE YEAR 16 - Ed. Terry Carr
[Gollancz, 1987, 388pp, £11.95 hardback, £3.95 paperback]
BEST NEW SCIENCE FICTION - Ed. Gardner Dozois
[Robinson, 1987, 615pp, £4.95]
Reviewed by Maureen Porter

HERE ARE TWO ANTHOLOGIES COMPILED BY two acknowledged masters of a difficult art, and both extremely good. As a summary of the year's activities, both present a reasonably accurate picture, include some of the same authors, some of the same stories, and provide suggestions for further reading. Each is a useful working tool, an excellent guide to the current state of short story publishing. But any reviewer in a magazine of this sort, reviewing this sort of material, simply must have an eye for good value, and it is only fair to point out that of eleven stories in Carr, five are also in the Dozois anthology, along with twenty two others.

This is not to denigrate the Carr collection but it works on a much tighter brief, and is more specifically concerned with the stories he has chosen rather than, as Dozois does, setting them in a wider context. Dozois presents a far-ranging summary of the state of SF in 1986, as well as a far more thorough bibliography, always vital to anyone who uses an anthology of this nature for indications of where to read next.

Having said that, the choice of stories in both volumes is excellent. Dozois reprints the excellent 'R & R' by Lucius Shepard, whilst Carr chose a less known but equally interesting story from this author, 'Aymara'. Both choose Orson Scott Card's 'Hatrack River', and the same elegant stories by James Patrick Kelly, Harry Turtledove and Judith Moffat. But Dozois also includes stories by such people as Bruce Sterling, Somtow Sucharitkul, Michael Swanwick and Pat Cadigan, all authors worth reading. Carr, on the other hand, reprints the latest of Varley's Anne-Louise Bach stories. It is hard to make a choice between one or the other. If you have the money, buy both, if on a limited budget, for goodness sake choose the infinitely better value of the Dozois collection, unless you especially like John Varley.

ÆGYPT - John Crowley
[Gollancz, 1987, 390pp, £11.95]
Reviewed by David V. Barrett & K.V.Bailey

JOHN CROWLEY COULD NOT HAVE WRITTEN *Ægypt* without first writing *Little, Big*. Not that there's much similarity in the story, though there are many textual and thematic echoes; but the philosophical mindset behind and within *Ægypt* is a much more thorough working out of ideas he had only begun to explore in *Little, Big*.

The Art of Memory Ariel Hawksquill practises in *Little, Big*, for example, was developed to perhaps its fullest extent by Giordano Bruno, the 16th century Italian philosopher at the centre of *Ægypt*. To underline this link, Crowley has Pierce Moffett stand - for one paragraph - outside a locked park and wish for the key: it was in the locked park that the younger Auberon met Hawksquill and first heard of the Art of Memory. Just to hammer it home, Pierce remembers his childhood: "he had been a large and ill-made child ... a little big and pretty ugly."

This is the essence of *Ægypt*: the ability - the necessity - to believe two or more explanations for the same occurrence. Truths may appear contradictory, but Truth encompasses truths. Similarly, "there is more than one history of the world," a phrase which occurs many times in *Ægypt*. Quantum physicists have only recently come to accept what Renaissance philosophers, scientists, astrologers held as their bed-rock: everything affects everything else, and can be seen in a number of different ways simultaneously. Indeed, Truth can only be approached in this way.

If this seems heavy and off-putting, don't worry. On its simplest level *Ægypt* is the story of Pierce Moffett, an American college teacher who, like Smoky Barnable in *Little, Big*, moves from the Big City to a rural community. He comes to realise that behind the "facts" of history books lies another, deeper history. He traces back through the Renaissance thinkers, the Elizabethan John Dee and the Italian Bruno, through Gnostic "heresy", to the writings of Hermes Trismegistus, thought in Renaissance times to come from pre-Christian Egypt but now known to be 2nd or 3rd century AD.

And so not Egypt, but Ægypt, a source of the hermetic knowledge and wisdom which has remained undercover for most of recorded history. Pierce plans to write a book, probably titled *Ægypt*, in which he will plot his journey of discovery. But there are other novels within Crowley's *Ægypt* by one Fellowes Kraft involving Dee and Bruno. Kraft's works form a quarter of Crowley's text; we shift between Pierce's discoveries and Kraft's, and Dee's, and Bruno's, find overlaps and echoes everywhere, and have to work our way back through the nested boxes to realise that all these discoveries, all these books, are subtexts within Crowley's book, mapping his journey of discovery which, by our reading it, becomes a part of ours.

Ægypt is not SF, or fantasy, or mainstream, but part of a new genre which transcends all these: the 20th century Renaissance novel. This is not just meta-fiction but metaphysical fiction, blurring the boundaries between SF, fantasy, horror, science, history, philosophy, religion, hermeticism ... drawing together for possibly the first time since the

B O O K S

17th century such supposedly disparate fields. These books aren't easy; but they're arguably the most significant fiction being written today. [DVB]

LITTLE, BIG WAS ESSENTIALLY FANTASY; *Ægypt* is a realistic novel. Like *The Deep*, it moves us to consider what powers and energies may be at large in the universe; unlike it, its world is ours, populated by people catching buses, farming sheep, having parties, playing croquet. It is, however, preoccupied with metaphysics and brings over from *Little, Big* a concept voiced there by Hawksquill who, after pondering over the Edgewood orrery and the antithesis of Newtonian clockwork and a universe moved "by will; by angels, by gods", later concludes: "No, not two worlds; with Occam's razor she could slit the throat of that idea. One world only with different modes; what any way was a 'world'?"

The title *Ægypt* signifies, not the geo-historical land of Egypt, but all that is encompassed by hermetic philosophy. The novel explores the "one world/two worlds" question as it is posed to himself by Pierce Moffatt, an academic drop-out who resigns from teaching college in New York to live arcadianly in the New England hills, where he contemplates writing a history focussed upon the submerged existence of Renaissance "magical" and analogical science. In this pastoral community lives Rosie Rasmussen, involved in a divorce, through whose book-addicted mind we dip into the historical novels of a recently dead local author, Fellowes Kraft. Pierce, who in sifting through Kraft's papers discovers an unpublished manuscript, regards the novels simply as period romances; but excerpts from them, and particularly from the unfinished manuscript, eventually occupy whole chapters of *Ægypt*, and Pierce comes to discern through the trappings of historical fiction an illumination of the very theme with which he is obsessed. We, the readers, realise that we have, in effect, a novel within a novel, Crowley's pastiche-writing attaining a brilliance that transcends pastiche. These inset narratives concern chiefly the lives of Doctor John Dee and Giordano Bruno. Interweaving "magic", the mnemonic art, philosophy and theology, they contain some of *Ægypt*'s finest descriptive and imaginative passages; in particular an "astral" vision of the Glastonbury Zodiac, and Bruno's dawn experience of solar-identity on the Mont Cenis Pass.

The ending of this sensitively humane and evocative work knits together the earlier intimations of its "Prologue in Heaven" and "Prologue on Earth" - respectively parts of the "contained" and the "containing" novels. It leaves Pierce rational, but nostalgically regretful, recognising the outside universe as constituting a "world that is real but strange", yet still having knowledge of "a world within that makes sense, and draws tears of assent from us when we enter there." [KVB]

THE SHADOW OF HIS WINGS - Bruce Fergusson
[Grafton, 1987, 300pp, £10.95 hardback, £6.95 paperback]
Reviewed by Valerie Housden

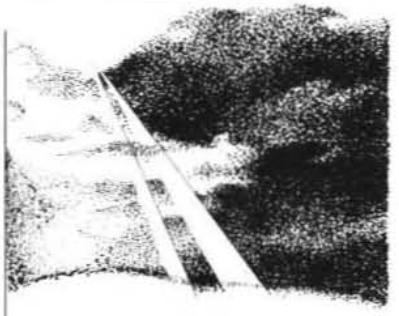
THIS BOOK IS SUBTITLED "A FANTASY Saga", as if you hadn't already gathered that from the Olde Worlde lettering used for the title, and the illustration on the dust cover depicting an emaciated semi-draconic, semi-demonic beastie with silly little wings and long hands hovering over a mass of men armed with spears and bows who appear to be trapped in a narrow mountain pass. As if that wasn't disincentive enough, the blurb on the back states that the author "has brought a breath of fresh air to a tired genre"!

In fairness this is a brave attempt to do just that. The sub-plot of sibling rivalry between narrator Lukan and his elder brother is convincingly portrayed. The compulsory Quest bears a greater resemblance to the chaotic First Crusade than to the exploits of Frodo & Co. The resident monster, known as the Erseiyr, is more interested in acquiring hands than in guarding his treasure.

The other elements of modern fantasy are all there. The story is set in a medieval society ruled by a corrupt despot. An invading army is almost at the gates. Oh, and there is the usual love interest in the form of a girl well able to look after herself but who, in the climactic fight between Lukan and Vearus (and Vearus' falcon), just stands and watches, occasionally screaming "Look out!"

Although the final twist took me by surprise, much of the plot is predictable, which is a pity. For the setting is vividly described, the action scenes are exciting, and the tension well-maintained throughout. The characters too are well drawn, I found the depiction of wicked brother Vearus particularly sympathetic, and the development of the central figure from *ingenu* to reluctant hero is well sustained. All the strands are neatly tied up - this should not develop into a trilogy! Fergusson tells the tale well and will probably keep you turning the pages to the end, providing you actually begin the story in the first place.

This is apparently Fergusson's first published novel. He is a competent yarn-spinner who writes well. All he needs are a few good ideas.



ANCIENT LIGHT - Mary Gentle
[Gollancz, 1987, 539pp, £11.95]
Reviewed by Barbara Davies & Maureen Porter

THIS LONG AWAITED SEQUEL TO *GOLDEN Witchbreed* by occasional *Vector* contributor Mary Gentle, and partially dedicated to *Vector* editor David V. Barrett, is a huge tome.

Golden Witchbreed introduced us to Lynne de Lisle Christie, Earth's envoy on Carrick V. Ten years have passed and Lynne no longer works for the government - she is special advisor to the multicorporate Pan Oceania Company. Her previous stay on Carrick V, known to its inhabitants as Orthe, affected her deeply. As an empath, her loyalties are divided. The Company representative, Molly Rachel, has no such scruples - her aim is to trade whatever is necessary for technological artifacts surviving from Orthe's Golden Empire. This Empire's fall resulted in the devastation of half the planet by a fearsome weapon now known as ancient light. Present day Ortheans have deep taboos surrounding Golden technology, and Pan Oceania's desire for trade in these ancient artifacts proves to be a destabilising influence. As the declining political situation leads to outright war, and Earth's peace-keeping forces are called in, Lynne tries to minimise the Company's unwitting damage and restore normality. She is aided by old friends from the previous book, suitably changed in the intervening ten years. As if this were not enough, there is the additional question - has workable Golden technology been rediscovered and will the terrible weapon be used again?

Mary Gentle's characters, human and Orthean, are detailed and convincing. In particular, Lynne and Ruric Orhlandis are skillfully handled. Orthe, and its culture, is well thought out - the author gives full details and a glossary in appendices. The plot strands are compelling and the narrative flows smoothly. My reservations are with the torrents of strange words and names - used often repetitively, and with the length of the book. Although broken down into seven parts, 40 chapters seemed rather too many. The plot would have gripped better if it had been shorter.

B O O K S

To conclude - I enjoyed *Ancient Light*. It is a good book; but with some judicious pruning it could have been great. [BD]

THE SEQUEL TO *GOLDEN WITCHBREED* SEES Lynne de Lisle Christie's return to Orthe. Ten years earlier she was a government envoy there, and became deeply involved in the lives of the people she met. Now she returns as an advisor to a huge company, her loyalties divide between the people she once knew, and those she works for. She is worried about the effect of the company's search for technological objects remaining from the time of the Golden Empire, regarded as taboo by present day Ortheans. Rightly so, for the unscrupulous activities of the company representative undermine the political situation, leading to war and the fear of the Golden weapon, ancient light, being used once again.

I enjoyed *Golden Witchbreed*, and in some ways I have enjoyed *Ancient Light* as much, yet in others it irritates me profoundly. The story, though twisting and complex, is well paced, interesting and exciting. However, Lynne's internal monologues and her long, visionary experiences tend to slow down the action too much and give a rather leaden effect. In a book this size, and it is large, slowing down the action too much can be fatal and it says much for the author's ability that one perseveres with the narrative.

The characterisation is as strong as I recall it from *Golden Witchbreed*, particularly Lynne de Lisle Christie who is a fine creation, a less than perfect heroine, given to doubts and worries, in short as recognisably real and human as her readers. There is also a delicate sense of regret for the passing of the Orthe that she remembers, coupled with a realisation that things always change. Beyond that, the wider parallels of a clash of cultures can be drawn from modern experiences in the Third World, and the preoccupation with nuclear and similar weapons is always with us. A long, slow book, a little confusing in places, but on the whole, a worthwhile successor to *Golden Witchbreed*. [MSP]

BEOWULF - Adapted by Julian Glover, illustrated by Sheila Mackie
[Alan Sutton, 1987, 144pp, £14.95]
Reviewed by Maureen Porter

"MY TASK, AS I SAW IT, WAS TO TELL the story of the definitive hero, the warrior Beowulf." Thus wrote Julian Glover in his foreword to this new version of *Beowulf* based on Glover's own excellent one man show, which was in turn drawn from the work of Michael Alexander and Edwin Morgan. Magnus Magnusson contributes an interesting, if admittedly predictable, introduction, but the glory of this book (and presumably the reason for pricing such a little book so highly) is the sumptuous artwork of Sheila Mackie, both in the richly coloured full page capitals, and in the charming line illustrations.

Julian Glover also says "... all literature concerns ... the Good Guy, Bad Guy conflict. The writers of *Beowulf* were simply the first to write it down". In an age when identikit fantasy novels are flooding an already overburdened market, when imitation has become not only a form of flattery but also a sure way of making a fast buck, it is a refreshing experience to go back to *Beowulf*, surely the first British fantasy, and remind oneself of Beowulf's epic fight with Grendel and his mother, and his later, fatal, fight with the dragon. One can only marvel at how difficult modern authors have found it to improve on the wonderful original. It is still the quintessential fantasy.

THE STAINLESS STEEL RAT GETS DRAFTED - Harry Harrison
[Bantam, 1987, 256pp, £9.95]
Reviewed by L.J.Hurst

THIS SEVENTH VOLUME OF AUTOBIOGRAPHY from James diGriz starts with 18-year-old Slippery Jim hanging at the top of a liftshaft trying to escape from gaol and failing, and ends with him driving back a planetary invasion force on another world. In between he engages in his usual activities of robbery, impersonation, violence and the defeat of supercriminals. Essentially, the structure of events is the same as in *The Stainless Steel Rat*, published over 25 years ago.

The main theme tying start to finish is the hunt for General Zennor (continued, I suppose, from *A Stainless Steel Rat is Born*). Within this the novel is divided into two parts - diGriz's battle against the military on one planet, and his freedom fighting on the world they invade. Within these parts diGriz has other jaunts and japes, some of which help him in the short term, eg. by supplying money, and others further the main theme. There is also a final revelation that the Rat has not only been fulfilling his ambitions as he thinks, but those of a higher authority as well. A cover note suggests that "The Rat can hold his head high amongst the most elevated superhero company - Bulldog Drummond, James Bond and Flash Gordon included". They were stereotyped, but I cannot remember if those books repeated a structure so obviously as this repeats an earlier member of the series.

However, the story moves forward easily for the most part and I read it in one sitting the first time, partly because I did not want to put it down. The second part, which requires a detailed account of its computer designed political theory (anarchism by time and motion studies out of workfare) is slower moving than the first, and also a little deeper.

Ultimately, this is a book that deserves George Orwell's description of Dickens: "rotten architecture but wonderful gargoyles."

TO SAIL BEYOND THE SUNSET - Robert A. Heinlein
[Michael Joseph, 1987, 446pp, £11.95]
Reviewed by Ken Lake

THIS IS A VERY NASTY BOOK. IT IS ALSO a very dirty book. Furthermore, no way is it SF - the science fictional content is so minimal as to bring the book within the bounds of the Trade Description Act's strictures on misleading advertising claims.

Heinlein's aim, we are told, is to tie up the loose ends in his ongoing Future History, which began with the stories that make up *The Man Who Sold The Moon* and concludes with *Time Enough For Love* and *The Cat Who Walks Through Walls*. I have read all but the last of these, and frankly this latest exercise in collation would have been better left unwritten.

The cover presents Maureen Long, improbably orange-haired, underdressed tart who is the author's ideal woman. Several thousand years old by now, she spends a great deal of the book with a blow-by-blow recollection of sex with her son, husband, neighbours and friends, and with the glorification of incest (for fun, not procreation) and childbirth (after insemination by members of the Howard Foundation, all long-lived Americans of whom her son/husband/lover Lazarus Long is the exemplar.

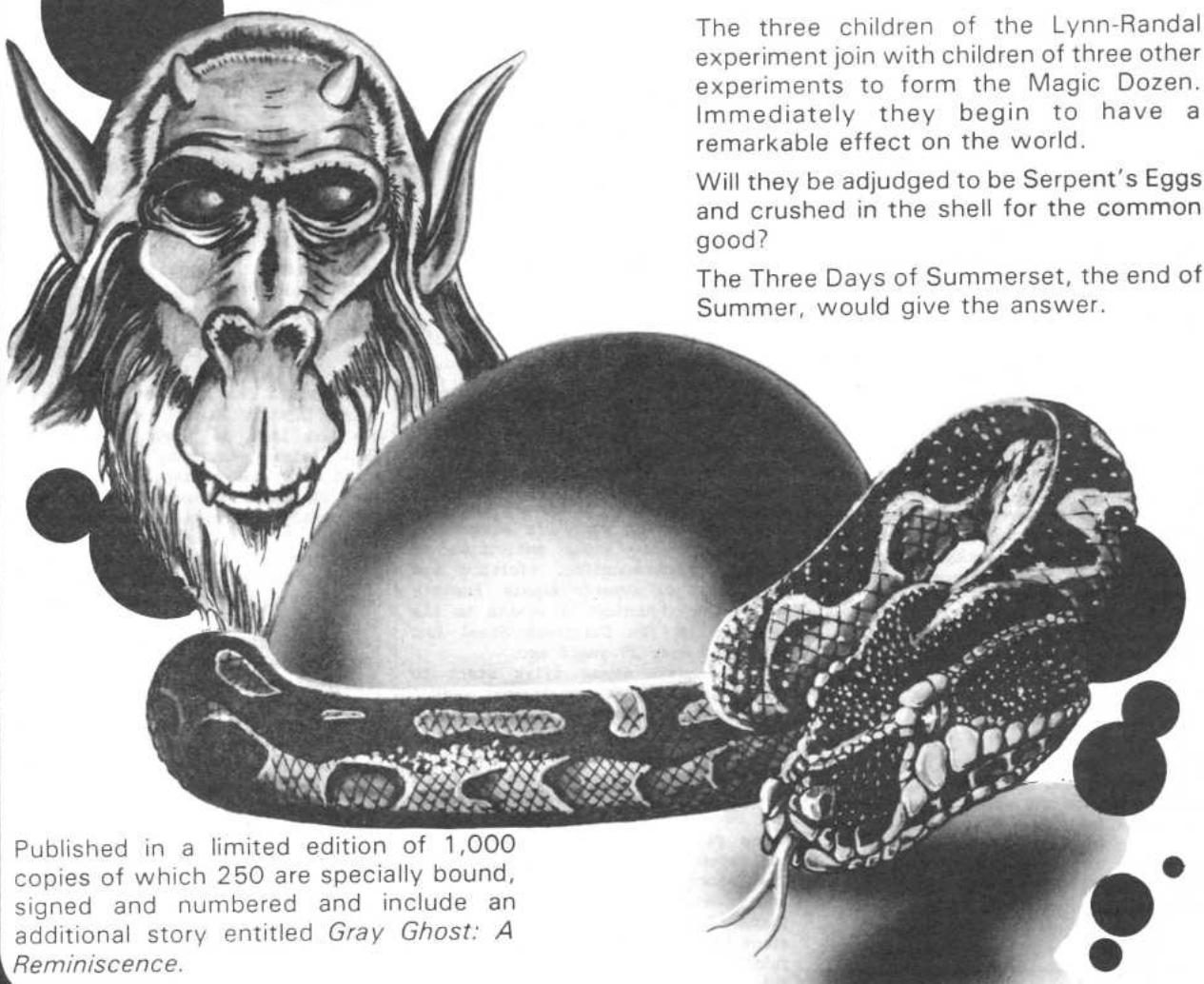
Heinlein is very seriously mentally disturbed. He is hung up on spanking little girls, on vaginal examinations, on anything to do with vaginas in fact, on sexual degradation in general, on adultery and voyeurism and the loss of virginity.

He still sees himself as the archetypal "competent man" but this time the stress is on penises and condoms, dewy-eyed death-and-glory in war, Yankee chauvinism and a minute examination of life in 19th (and early 20th) century rural and small-town America. In fact for the first time ever I confess to consciously skipping pages in a Heinlein book simply because the subject matter was so boring and its treatment so dull.

Yet with all this we do get at least one sparkling and thought-provoking Heinlein SF invention: the "telephone" as hologram of a head, to which the computer matches lip movements as it transmits the message.

SERPENT'S EGG

R. A. LAFFERTY



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A further title by the author, namely his remarkable gothic novel *East of Laughter*, is to be published in 1988. A major article by Gene Wolfe will be published with the Special Edition.

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But Heinlein goes out of his way, by a series of conjuring tricks, to drag in "tanks" and "flatties" - 3-D and TV telephones in another world system - and even those hoary old "roads that roll" from the thirties pulp fiction days, just to "tie up loose ends" which all but the most fannish of his readers will long ago have put out of their minds as unworkable ideas of the author's youth.

Even Spider Robinson, veteran supporter of Heinlein's eccentricities, would be hard put to excuse this farrago of sexist and often pornographic nonsense. I really am sorry to have to say this, but if you want to read Heinlein in an inspiring SF form, you will have to go back to his pre-1960 writings, of which there are enough to satisfy the most fastidious of fans.

A TALE OF TIME CITY - Diana Wynne Jones
[Methuen, 1987, 285pp, £8.95]
Reviewed by Helen McNabb

MY THESAURUS HAS 41 ALTERNATIVES TO "super" which, if listed, is still only about 10% of the asked for length for this review. That being so, I shall need to expound somewhat further.

There is much debate about what makes a "children's book". It is writers like Diana Wynne Jones who make that debate heated. Those who scornfully dismiss all children's literature as of negligible value (thus making children a sub species of humanity who deserve only dross) find themselves on shaky ground when presented with a book like this and asked to judge it without bias. One cannot dismiss Diana Wynne Jones, or other writers of children's books, in the same way one can dismiss Noddy, because the grounds for comparison are so wide apart.

This book *is* a tale of Time City, a place outside time, a place from where it is possible to enter any time - to enter history. Throughout history there are stable and unstable periods. In the unstable it is possible, unless great care is taken, to change history, something forbidden in Time City. One of the unstable periods is World War Two, and it is to that time that two boys, Jonathan and Sam go. Perturbed by hints of the end of Time City, which the adults around them seem to ignore, they decide that a girl called Vivian Smith is *the* Vivian Smith, the wife of the founder of Time City and the only one who can help them. Vivian, the protagonist, is swept from an evacuation train into the strange world of Time City by the boys who ignore her protests that she is not who they think, and by their mistake finds herself in the middle of what begins as a game but which becomes deadly earnest as the true nature of the threat to Time City is revealed.

The story moves at a cracking pace and is never less than enthralling; it has more invention and imagination than many an adult novel ten times its length. It doesn't have sex, or unnecessary violence or bad language, nor, which may be deemed a fault, is there any attempt to explain the "realities" of Time. Vivian accepts what she is told of how Time City works, with no pseudo-science as the explanation defies the attempts of Time City scientists to comprehend it. As a fault it bothers me not one bit but I am aware that many adult readers may find it evasive.

It is a well written, well plotted novel, with good believeable characters and I enjoyed it from the first page. I recommend it heartily to anyone who enjoys a tale well told.

TALES FROM THE FORBIDDEN PLANET - Ed. Roz Kaveney
[Titan Books, 1987, 256pp, £9.95 hardback £4.95 paperback]
Reviewed by Paul Brazier

THIS IS A VERY HANDSOME VOLUME, AND certainly one of the best produced and nicest-looking books I have received for a long time. However, it would be impossible to review in 400 words fourteen stories and fourteen illustrations by twenty-eight different well-known artists other than thus: if you know the names, (Aldiss, Banks, Kilworth, Roberts, Saxton, Achilleos, Burns, Gibbons, Gibson), you will know whether you like their work or not. There are no artistic surprises here, nor is there any really bad work.

Unfortunately, this makes it sound like a mediocre failure, especially compared with the simultaneously published *Other Edens*. but to consider this book generically, as an anthology, is a mistake. It is much more than that: it is a manifestation of something extraordinary which is happening in British SF.

The book is dedicated to the writers and artists who have done signings at Forbidden Planet (the shop), the staff who organised the signings, and *to the people who have queued round the block in the pouring rain* - in short, to *all* the people in Britain who care about this type of fiction. The shop thus *knows* what people want - and this book throws together a mish-mash of these favourites which makes it look more like a Forbidden Planet Annual than anything else. As such it is a celebration of British SF at its broadest (which includes the people who *buy* books, not just those who talk about writing), and breathes new life into some stale genres.

Interzone has tried to do this by respectabilising SF, even down to producing its own anthology. *Other Edens* is a good, workmanlike anthology, but more of the same. Whereas *Tales from the Forbidden Planet* is new and brash; it's got illustrations; it's got a glossy new look; and it refuses to be hobbled to one genre: where individual authors might have tried to widen their genre, this book bursts the seams of all the bags by lumping the lot together with a glorious disregard for any such classification.

This is a good start. If it can be followed up successfully, it will give a focus to British short fantastic fiction which has been sadly lacking of late (though not for want of trying). I glory in it, welcome it, and hope that the next one will be thrown together with the same reckless abandon, but perhaps with less familiar names - because it is vigorous, it is different, and it works.

FREEDOM BEACH - James Patrick Kelly & John Kessel
[Unwin, 1987, 259pp, £2.95]
Reviewed by Michael Fearn

IN *FREEDOM BEACH* WE ARE FACED WITH a character who is attempting to regain equilibrium after a traumatic experience. Apart from one masterly interlude, the vicarious omphaloscopy does begin to pall. For the original interest which it contains, it is simply too long, although a pleasant (and occasionally witty) read.

The world has been taken over by "The Dreamers", a remote (although seemingly benign) unseen group of computer experts to whom the world has yielded up control for the greater good of all. The dreamers have their moments: such as their insistence that every magazine of whatever sort carry a poetry supplement. This creates an EEC-like poetry mountain!

Shaun Reed wakes at Freedom Beach with no real idea how he got there and even less of where he is. In a world which bears just a little too much resemblance to *The Prisoner* and Porthmeirion, he learns that his therapy is to sleep and to dream. His world, and that of the other inmates, is regulated by talking statues, a loquacious sphinx, and the addictive "communion" dispensed with rations. Writing is absolutely forbidden, and he is exhorted to take part in healthy games, as are the other guests.

The dream sequences are intercut with scenes from his past life. The meshing of the two strands points the way to a tortuous labyrinth of psychological analogies; a maze into which I could not raise the motivation to follow him.

Literary pastiche is chosen as the method of dream therapy. One of these is a mediocre evocation of Raymond Chandler, but the first is an absolute masterpiece of humorous writing in which the story of Doctor Faustus is retold in the manner of a Marx Brothers film. For this interlude alone the book deserves a place in

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anyone's collection but this is only a 24 page section in a 259 page book.

Shaun's route to recovery follows closely a path of what he terms "cognitive dissonance" which is far more effectively trodden in the *Butterfly Kid/Unicorn Girl* novels of Kurland and Anderson, not to mention *Illuminatus*. There must be something to be said for a book in which the main character can span the gulf from an early episode in medieval Wittenburg to a final conversation with a concrete sphinx in Central Park. Confused? You will be!

TUF VOYAGING - George R.R. Martin
[Gollancz, 1987, 374pp, £10.95]
Reviewed by Keith Freeman

TUF VOYAGING IS A COLLECTION OF 7 stories - 6 of which were originally printed in *Analog*. This is probably all I need to say as far as some readers are concerned. For those who don't know the "*Analog*-type story" it can best be summed up in this quote from the November 87 *Analog* editorial "Problems are the foundations of stories, but *solutions* are usually what makes them worthwhile and memorable."

According to the copyright dates the stories were not published in sequence. If this means they were not written sequentially it is not noticeable internally in the stories which chronicle Haviland Tuf's acquisition and subsequent use of a vast and (to him) ancient working Ecological Engineering Corps spaceship, the Ark. Once he has gained control of this ship, the basis of the first story, he essentially becomes a superman. The remaining six stories present him with problems and explain how, with the aid of the Ark's technology, he achieves solutions - solutions that do not always please his "customers". I admit to speculating whether the author thought of the problems before the solutions, or vice versa!

Caracterisation is not the strong point of these stories - Tuf is described several times, and an attempt is made to make him memorable by emphasising such things as his dietary habits, etc - but this does not, for me, build his character up or make him "real". The other, almost obligatory, fault is that the stories, due to their original spaced-out publication, contain repetitive references. I became vexed with the descriptions of the vast immensity of the Ark's landing deck and the ships that occupy it. The beginning of the fourth story delights me:

> It was more habit than hobby, and it was certainly not anything acquired deliberately, with malice aforethought; nonetheless, it had undoubtedly been acquired, Haviland Tuf collected spacecraft.

I find the first sentence awkwardly constructed and, read by itself, difficult to readily understand - but the next four words give the flavour of almost throwaway grandeur that the author has tried to instil about the Ark and Tuf.

High recommended, especially to anyone who likes *Analog* stories, recommended even to those who've read the stories as they appeared over the years 1976 to 1986.

INTERVENTION - Julian May
[Collins, 1987, 546pp, £10.95]
Reviewed by Barbara Davies

JULIAN MAY'S LATEST TOME IS DESCRIBED as a "vinculum", ie bond or chain, between the *Saga of the Pliocene Exiles* and her forthcoming trilogy, the *Galactic Milieu*.

Intervention is set in 2113, the 100th anniversary of alien contact with humankind. Rogatien Remillard, a surname familiar to Pliocene fans, is encouraged to write his memoirs for the period 1945-2013. The rest of the plot consists of extracts from these memoirs together with other assorted texts needed to ensure a smooth storyline. It charts the evolution of the human race to a state where enhanced mental powers are the norm: powers such as telepathy, out-of-body travel and coercion. Genes are no respecter of morals so these powers are inherited by good and evil alike. This is epitomised by the Remillard family, where Rogatien and his nephew Denis are the good guys and his brother Don and another nephew Victor are the bad guys.

In addition to the development of the human mind, *Intervention* also examines the reaction of "normal" humans to the superminds in their midst. The balance of world power must inevitably be altered when minds can detect hidden weapons and thoughts, yet in spite of this new protection cataclysmic events such as the atomic bombing of Israel still occur. Meanwhile, in their invisible space ships, representatives of five alien races watch and wait for the time that Earth is mature and stable enough to ask for contact and to join with them in the Galactic Milieu.

Julian May writes in her usual flowing prose keeping your interest at all times. Her main characters are strong but not always very convincing. There is plenty of action, though spread rather thinly over the period. SF references abound. Rogatien is an SF bookshop owner and makes sly reference to fantasy with dragons and SF conference behaviour. Stapledon's *Odd John* is quoted extensively.

The action incorporates real people and events. Interesting to note that the Iranians have superceded the Russians as the new baddies. The ethical problems caused by possession of super powers are interesting and topical in the light of Alan Moore's *Watchmen*.

While reading, I enjoyed *Intervention*. Afterwards I felt rather empty as though the book had contained little substance in spite of its volume. It may be that Julian May is working on the Chinese meal theory - after all, next year sees the start of her new trilogy!

SKIRMISH - Melisa Michaels
[Livewire, 1987, 230pp, £3.50]
Reviewed by Sue Thomason

SKIRMISH IS ONE OF THE FIRST TITLES to appear in the new Livewire (teenage reading) series from the Women's Press. It's a fast-paced adventure starring Melacha Rendell the Skyrider, hottest shuttle-jockey in the Belt. Melacha lives high, fast and hard; taking all the most hazardous shuttle runs, invariably returning to Company Base with her shuttle shot to Hell after a close brush with the Patrol, picking fistfights as a matter of routine emotional discharge. She'd make a great Golden Age space-jock, apart from the minor detail of being the wrong gender.

Jamin, her co-star, has "motherhood" written all over him. He's a talented liner pilot and freefall mutant, who has given up his career to live in full gravity (on a heavy drug regime) and care for Collis, his adopted son, who can't tolerate freefall.

Meanwhile, a space liner carrying 300 passengers and a valuable top secret cargo is falling into the sun! Skyrider and Jamin to the rescue, and so on and so on; complete with dogfights in space, dirty political intriguing, flashbacks to Melancha's tragic past, and gradual dawn of sympathy and understanding between protagonists.

Of course, when reading a story like this, the moment you stop running with the wind of excitement, you fall through the holes in the plot. And a serious, thoughtful examination of Life's Problems for Young People Today this certainly ain't. But fun it is; well-enough written to keep me focussed on the plot not the grammar, with occasional lyrical touches suggesting that Michaels is also competent at handling slower-paced, more thoughtful material. Not that there's anything wrong with a good romp once in a while, and *Skirmish* is just that, a most excellent romp.

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THE DRAGON IN THE SWORD - Michael Moorcock
[Grafton, 1987, 283pp, £6.95]
Reviewed by Terry Broome

HOT ON THE HEELS OF THE HARDBACK IS the only slightly less expensive hardback-sized paperback. Chris Barker (in *Vector* 140), I believe wrongly, suggests this book shows Moorcock's continuing development as a writer, though dedicated readers may detect a greater depth to his exploration of the Eternal Champion idea (I did not).

John Daker, accompanied by Count Von Bek (a character from Nazi-Germany whose mission in life is to kill Hitler) journey through the Seven Realms of the Wheel in search of Daker's lost love, Ermizhad. They encounter a group of Eldrin women who have become parted from their men, but wish to rejoin them. They cannot do so without the help of a dragon which is captured in a sword Daker fears because of its effect on him in his other incarnations. But Daker, spurred on by the responsibility and guilt of his identity as the Eternal Champion, agrees to help them out. Von Bek's destiny and his thus become entwined, and by the book's end each achieves a certain kind of peace.

The novel is sometimes self-consciously written and I found the strange ambivalence of one of the characters towards the Eternal Champion, a figure she has only previously heard of in legend, unconvincing. The similarities between this book and *The Swords of Corum* are strong, and yet each scene, taken individually, is unique, reflecting the author's powerful imagination.

Despite these quibbles, I could not put the book down, and Moorcock's satiric portrayal of a scene involving Goering (who was, in reality, sane enough to arrange for the safety of his Jewish wife), Goebbels and Hitler is not to be missed. Is this the last we'll hear of the Eternal Champion, I wonder? Moorcock leaves this question hanging: commercial to the last, but clever with it.

KURT VONNEGUT: A COMPREHENSIVE BIBLIOGRAPHY - Asa B. Pieratt, Julie Huffman-Klinkowitz & Jerome Klinkowitz
[Archon, 1987, 315pp, £31.05]
Reviewed by Andy Sawyer

THIS IS A WELL-ORGANISED BIBLIOgraphy, aimed at the student rather than the fan, covering the books, short fiction, essays, reviews and interviews of Kurt Vonnegut. The compilers have cast their net wide: there are also sections covering Vonnegut's undergraduate contributions to the *Cornell Sun*, dramatic and cinematic adaptations of his work, tape and film recordings, an annotated checklist of Vonnegut criticism, and listings of dissertations on Vonnegut and reviews of his books. A comprehensive updating of a bibliography published in 1974, this work, the compilers claim, "brings together all the published material both by and about Vonnegut from 1950 through 1985 in a manner which will answer the needs of scholars, critics, students and book collectors."

It's well produced and detailed, listing, for example, 35 dissertations and 265 items of criticism, not to mention full bibliographical details of variant editions (including foreign editions, both legitimate and "pirate") of his books. I would have liked a fuller index, but it's easy enough to find your way around. As for the claims to include *all* the material - well, bibliographers make these claims at their peril. Vonnegut is a peculiar writer to categorise, neither wholly *of* SF nor wholly *outside* it, and the compilers have clearly made some effort to scan the SF press, citing, among others, Andy Darlington's interview in *SF Review* 50 (1984) and reviews in *Fantasy and Science Fiction*. But a hasty and far from thorough search through my woefully inadequate collection of SF critical periodicals came up with Philip Strick's long review of *Breakfast of Champions* in *Foundation* 5, and Bruce Fergusson's overview of Vonnegut's SF as well as Dave Wingrove's review of *Slapstick* in *Vector* 87. In passing, the section on reviews of Vonnegut's novels doesn't seem to cite anything from the SF review press.

But I'm not sure who comes out of this best because - self-deprecation aside - my search threw up surprisingly little in the way of serious examination of Vonnegut as a science fiction writer. If he's really as neglected as he seems to be within the field, then the appearance of this bibliography (which should make it easier to track down and evaluate what has been written, as well as providing an excellent implicit overview of Vonnegut's career) could offer a welcome opportunity for some assessment.

CHERNOBYL - Frederik Pohl
[Bantam, 1987, 355pp, £4.95]
Reviewed by John Newsinger

> I have seen your *White Nights* and *Moscow on the Hudson*. In one of them, every Russian is evil. In the other, we are all Half-wits. Why are there not any American films which sometimes show at least one Russian as a decent human being?

THIS VERY GOOD QUESTION IS ASKED BY one of the minor Russian characters in Pohl's new novel of the Chernobyl disaster. Inadvertently perhaps, it identifies what is clearly the book's central purpose: to portray the Russian people as decent, ordinary human beings similar to ourselves. The book is intended to help counter the still predominant Cold War portrayal of the Russian menace in the American media. All this might seem a commonplace objective in Britain, but in Reagan's America it is a far more daunting prospect, requiring a degree of political courage one can only applaud.

Pohl's well-written, craftsman-like novel shows a relatively small cast - Smin the Deputy Director, Sheranchuk the Chief Hydrologist, Kalychenko the runaway operator, Konov the private soldier and some lesser characters - trying to cope with the disaster in Number 4 Reactor. He emphasises their ordinariness and their common decency, that their cares and worries, hopes and longings are essentially the same as ours even if Russian society is different. Ordinary Russians are shown displaying heroism and self-sacrifice in the face of incredible danger. They win both our sympathy and our admiration.

While the novel is primarily concerned to establish the common humanity of the Russian people, as one would expect with Pohl, it does not shirk the task of social criticism. Russian society is passed under a microscope that lays bare its injustices and oppressions, its inefficiency and corruption, its poverty and privileges. Moreover this is still a society where to openly criticise is to invite the attentions of the KGB.

In one chilling scene, after the town of Pripyat has been evacuated because of the danger from contamination, the soldier Konov and his friend Miklas come across a squad of KGB men. They are searching the abandoned flats for samizdat literature, anything incriminating. Konov and his buddy convince them that their evidence is too radioactive to be removed.

What of the disaster itself? Pohl's account of the explosion in Number 4 Reactor and of the containment of the subsequent fire is well-written, but nevertheless always remains secondary to the political and social concerns of the novel. It makes no real contribution to the debate over the safety of nuclear power but still leaves nagging doubts worrying away.

Pohl clearly identifies with attempts to reform Russian Communism and shows the Chernobyl disaster as actually strengthening the hand of those arguing for modernisation and democratisation. From this point of view, the book ends on an optimistic note which I, for one, cannot entirely share. Not a work of science fiction, but still an important book by one of the genre's authentic grand masters.

B O O K S

MORT - Terry Pratchett
[Gollancz, 1987, 221pp, £10.95]
Reviewed by Jon Wallace

DEATH LIVES! AND HE DECIDES HE NEEDS an apprentice. At the same time, Mort's father realises that it would be a good idea to put his gangling son to trade, any trade as long as it is far away ...

> "What trade in particular?"
> "Well ... carpentry is a good one. Or thievery. Someone's got to do it."
> If being an apprentice was what was expected of him then he was determined to be a good one. Carpentry didn't sound very promising, though - wood had a stubborn life of its own, and a tendency to split. And official thieves were rare in the Ramtops, where people weren't rich enough to afford them.

This, the fourth book in Terry Pratchett's Discworld series, is set firmly in the same mould as *The Colour of Magic*, *The Light Fantastic* and *Equal Rites*, and follows the story of Mort's apprenticeship to Death.

> "Boy," said the skull. "What is your name?"
> "Uh," said Mort, "Mortimer ... sir. They call me Mort."
> "What a coincidence," said the skull.

But this apprenticeship turns out disasterously. Mort badly bungles a job, and the fabric of Reality starts to unravel.

Terry Pratchett has been called the Douglas Adams of fantasy, and in the sense that both satirise aspects of SF, this is true, but Pratchett's books are fresher than Adams', they have more plot, and the jokes are funnier.

> Death leaned over and looked down at the kingdoms of the world.
> "I don't know about you," he said, "but I could murder a curry."

Is there anything else you want to know before you go out and buy this book?

STORM WARNINGS: SCIENCE FICTION CONFRONTS THE FUTURE - Ed. George E. Slusser, Colin Greenland and Eric S. Rabkin
[Southern Illinois University Press, 1987, 278pp, $26.95]
Reviewed by Paul Kincaid

HOW MANY WAYS DOES SCIENCE FICTION view the future? George Slusser identifies two: the literal which claims that we can never know the future by the same token that we can reach no more than an approximation of the past; and the mythic which sees our future projections as being drawn from something permanent in our past and present. I don't see that these two categories necessarily exclude all other possibilities, but Slusser certainly considers nothing else. And both categories, he says, lead to closure of the future, and to terror. SF's sole response to the future, he claims, is one of terror. It is a position reached by arguments more notable for their jargon and obfuscation than the clarity of their thought, and I found it far from convincing, yet it is this essay, 'Storm Warnings and Dead Zones', that is supposed to set the tone for this collection culled from the sixth Eaton Conference on Fantasy and Science Fiction.

Fortunately most of the other contributors eschew both this limited perception of the future, and the dense academic jargon it is expressed in. Some of the writers, notably Colin Greenland, George Hay and Gregory Benford, even inject a measure of humour into their clearly conceived, clearly expressed arguments; a welcome leavening of a very heavy-weight book.

Since the conference took place in 1984, it quite naturally concentrated on George Orwell's renowned book, and indeed practically every one of the essays comes back to this book at some point or other. So it was perhaps understandable that Slusser saw terror as science fiction's only response to the future. But, happily, there are sufficient counter-opinions gathered here to make us examine that claim very carefully. It is true that most if not all SF set in the near future sees that future as being worse that the present. But is that an expression of terror? Orwell, as we learn from these essays, may have been writing about the present or, indeed, the past - dark incidents from his own past certainly seem to inform the novel. *1984* may have been a 'storm warning', but it may equally have been a release. Nor is Orwell typical of science fiction writers, and there are others who portray a grim tomorrow so it might be overcome in an expression of hope.

In short, I think science fiction has a broader, more varied response to the future than is presented here. This collection is at its weakest when it attempts to present answers to what SF is doing, but where it raises questions and considers alternative views it is excellent and thought-provoking.

THE LOST ROAD AND OTHER WRITINGS - J.R.R.Tolkien (ed. Christopher Tolkien)
[Unwin, 1987, 455pp, £16.95]
Reviewed by Valerie Housden

I READ *LORD OF THE RINGS* AFTER LEAVING university and loved it. I then read *The Hobbit* which made me very cross. I was disappointed by the dull, academic's life described in Humphrey Carpenter's *J.R.R.Tolkien: A Biography*, and when it finally appeared *The Silmarillion* bored me to tears! Thus I have not attempted to plough my way through any of the subsequent compilations of his father's papers lovingly and painstakingly edited by Christopher Tolkien. Until *The Lost Road* landed on my doormat.

This book is described as Volume V in *The History of Middle Earth*. 'The Fall of Numenor and the Lost Road' gives the background to Tolkien's abandoned time travel novel based on the Atlantis legend. The method of travelling back through time was to be through:

> the occurence time and again in human families ... of a father and son called by names that could be interpreted as Bliss-friend and Elf-friend.

A different approach, and the few chapters Tolkien actually wrote set the scene for a story in which the tensions between the different generations could be fully explored. I am disappointed that this novel was never completed, but I have to agree with the reader whose report stated: "difficult to imagine this novel when completed receiving any sort of recognition except in academic circles".

Part III comprises 'The Etymologies' and is absolutely fascinating for anyone who, like me, is interested in the structure and development of language. This section should be dipped into at leisure, or used as a reference when re-reading other works.

I found both these parts more interesting than Part II which deals with the development of the mythology until Tolkien started writing *Lord of the Rings* in 1937, and includes the 'Quenta Silmarillion' which eventually appeared, after radical revision, in *The Silmarillion*. To appreciate this section fully it is necessary to refer not only to that work but also to volume IV and the lays in volume III, neither of which I have read. The appendix includes yet more maps, and there is a full index. A must for Tolkien freaks and those preparing doctorates, my cat and I agreed this book was a good excuse for a snooze on a rainy afternoon.

B O O K S

SPIDER WORLD: THE DELTA - Colin Wilson
(Grafton, 1987, 304pp, £10.95 hardback, £6.95 paperback)
Reviewed by Jim England

THIS IS THE SEQUEL TO *SPIDER WORLD: The Tower*, which a back cover blurb claims "will become a bestseller in the tradition of *The Lord of the Rings*." Readers will also note the similarity between the latter's Bilbo Baggins and the former's Bill Doggins. *Spider World* is the author's first venture into science fantasy and also into writing what he describes as a "children's book". As such it is not bad but bright children might note a slight amount of being "written down to", and science-oriented teenagers may feel that their intelligence is being insulted through a large slab of pseudo-science thrown in at one point to explain various mysteries. It is advisable also to read the first volume before the second, if only to understand the device in the story called a "thought mirror". (This shows Wilson's continuing interest in strange states of mind and powers.)

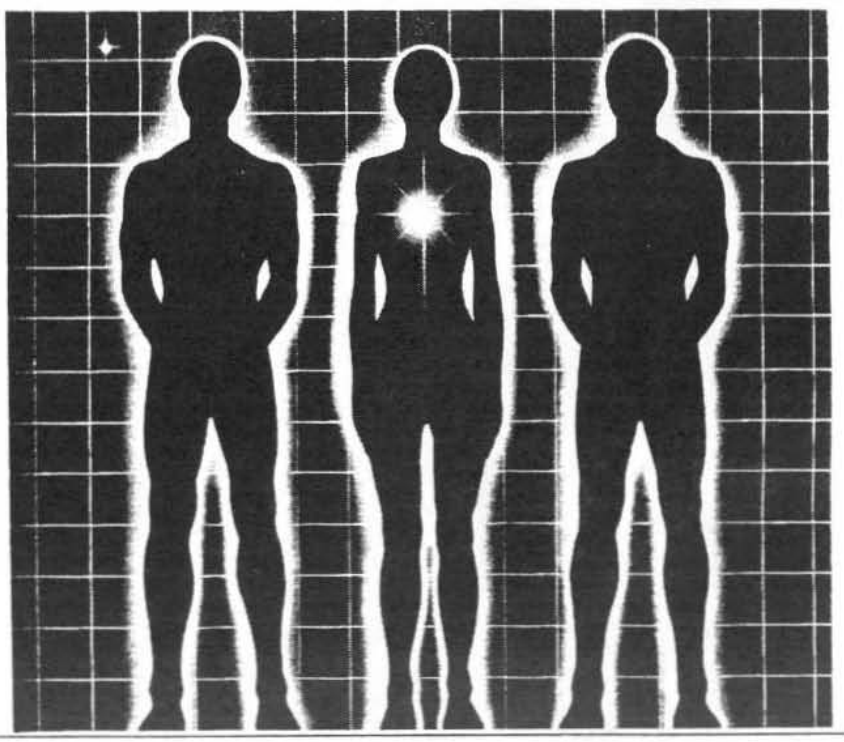
There is nothing laid-back about this book. It starts rather boringly with about twenty pages of dialogue and no action but then the characters dive headlong into one adventure after another at such a breathless pace that they have negligible time to show surprise at flesh-eating trees, monsters of all sorts, or even the discovery that one of their number firmly pronounced dead at one point has resumed life some time later. ("Fancy that!" they say in effect before pressing on with their adventures.) This being so, the reader can hardly be blamed for being surprised at nothing. It is true that we are *told* that the hero, Niall, is in an almost perpetual state of astonishment, but this is not enough to communicate astonishment to the reader. Characters sometimes "flush" or "turn pale" before they have had time to regain their normal neutral colour.

It must also be said that Niall makes a rather unconvincing hero; he is never described and is of unknown age in this volume, although presumably a youth; his introspections are lengthy and often banal or naive. Descriptions of surrounding terrain are often uninspired or repetitive. A *deus ex machina* sometimes obviates the necessity for Niall to make difficult decisions.

On the credit side, Wilson has made a valiant attempt to get away from the "might is right" philosophy of much children's fiction and convey the idea that other creatures should be respected besides human beings. Like much of Wilson's work, the book shows signs of being a rush job but it is an easy read.

BOOKS REVIEWED

Isaac Asimov - **FANTASTIC VOYAGE II: DESTINATION BRAIN**
Sarah Baylis - **THE TOMB OF REEDS**
Greg Bear - **THE FORGE OF GOD**
Octavia Butler - **DAWN: XENOGENESIS 1**
Terry Carr (Ed.) - **BEST SF OF THE YEAR 16**
John Crowley - **ÆGYPT**
Gardner Dozois (Ed.) - **BEST NEW SCIENCE FICTION**
Bruce Fergusson - **THE SHADOW OF HIS WINGS**
Mary Gentle - **ANCIENT LIGHT**
Julian Glover (Ad.) - **BEOWULF**
Harry Harrison - **THE STAINLESS STEEL RAT GETS DRAFTED**
Robert A. Heinlein - **TO SAIL BEYOND THE SUNSET**
Diana Wynne Jones - **A TALE OF TIME CITY**
Roz Kaveney (Ed.) - **TALES FROM THE FORBIDDEN PLANET**
James Patrick Kelly and John Kessel - **FREEDOM BEACH**
George R.R. Martin - **TUF VOYAGING**
Julian May - **INTERVENTION**
Melisa Michaels - **SKIRMISH**
Michael Moorcock - **THE DRAGON IN THE SWORD**
Asa B. Pieratt, Julie Huffman-Klinkowitz & Jerome Klinkowitz - **KURT VONNEGUT: A COMPREHENSIVE BIBLIOGRAPHY**
Frederik Pohl - **CHERNOBYL**
Terry Pratchett - **MORT**
George E. Slusser, Colin Greenland and Eric S. Rabkin (Ed.) - **STORM WARNINGS: SCIENCE FICTION CONFRONTS THE FUTURE**
J.R.R. Tolkien - **THE LOST ROAD AND OTHER WRITINGS**
Colin Wilson - **SPIDER WORLD: THE DELTA**



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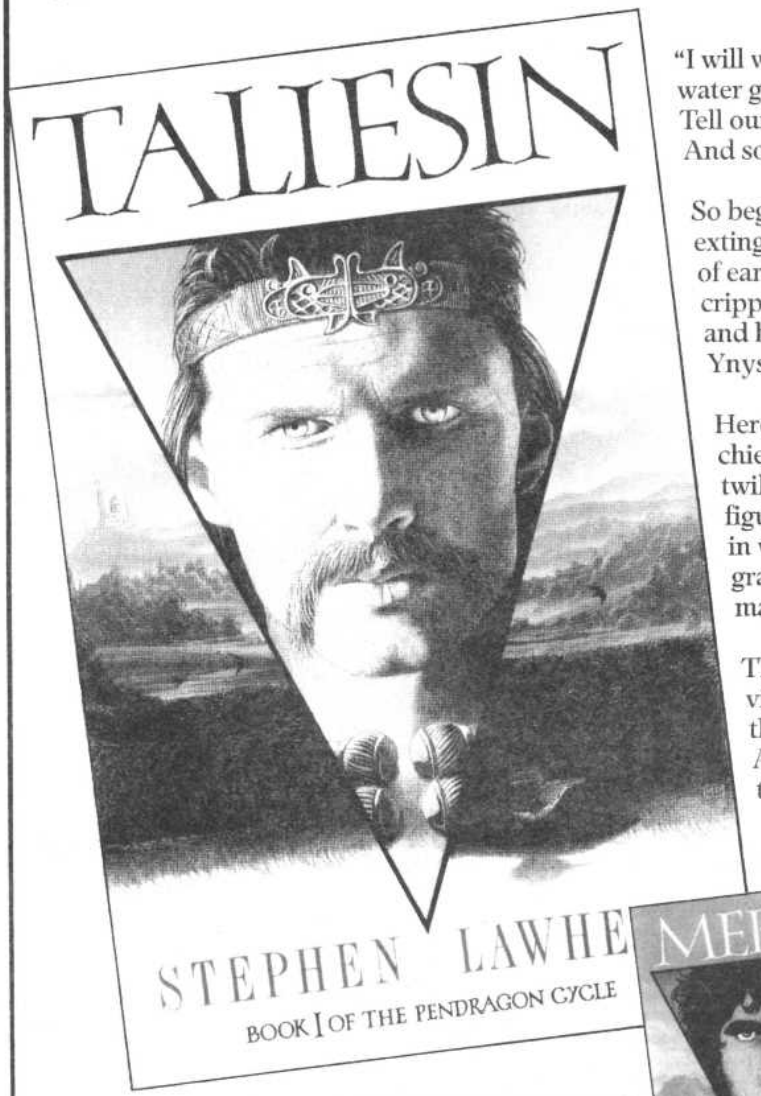

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