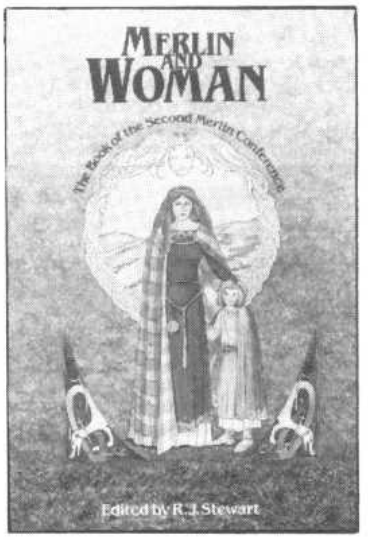
VECTOR 144

95p

The critical journal of the British Science Fiction Association

CYBERPUNK—
The Full Story

HOW NOT TO
WRITE A NOVEL



HITCH HIKER'S
GUIDE TO
CRIT LIT

MERLIN—
Picturing
a Legend

JUNE/JULY 1988

PLUS

Book Reviews and Letters

VECTOR 1·4·4

JUNE/JULY 1988

C O N T E N T S

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

PRINTED BY: PDC Copyprint, 11 Jeffries Passage, Guildford, Surrey GU1 4AP

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 8EW. (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.

ART: Cover art, illustrations and fillers welcome.

ADVERTISING: All advertising copy must be submitted as black and white camera-ready artwork with all necessary halftones. All enquiries on rates, ad sizes and special requirements to the Publicity Manager: Dave Wood, 1 Friary Close, Marine Hill, Clevedon, Avon BS21 7QA.

— THE BRITISH SCIENCE FICTION ASSOCIATION LTD —

EDITORIAL

DAVID V BARRETT

THIS IS MY 19TH *VECTOR*. A STRANGE NUMBER TO REMARK on, except that it is the beginning of my fourth year as editor. Time to reflect again on how it's gone, how it's going, and so on.

I put together the first couple of issues with my typewriter perched on my knee, and me perched on the bed of the hotel room where I was then living (this was, amazingly, before the days of the trusty Amstrad PCW, which all the editorial team use now). Paul, then as now, did an excellent job as reviews editor. *V126* was produced by Alan Dorey. Then Hussain Mohamed took over production, bringing his professional layout skills to bear; he was at that time production editor on *Nursing Times*. All the typing was done by Ann Morris.

Hussain's design is still the basis for *Vector* three years on. Simon Nicholson, with no previous experience but a tremendous willingness to learn, took over from Hussain, and Sandy Eason, Sharon Hall and David Cleden took over from Ann. Now Simon has left to pursue his freelance career, with our thanks and good wishes echoing in his ears, and Harriet Monkhouse has joined the team. Like Hussain, Harriet is a professional; as deputy chief sub editor on *Computer Weekly*, she sits a couple of desks away from my domain as features editor.

EDITORIAL POLICY

OUR POLICY REMAINS, AS ALWAYS, THAT *VECTOR* SHOULD BE THE most stimulating journal of SF and Fantasy criticism available anywhere. This means that sometimes it will be controversial, will annoy some readers intensely, and will cause some to write letters or articles saying "But it ain't so" or "But have you considered..." or, sadly, because it shows a closed mind, "If you do so-and-so again I'm resigning". A couple of years ago we were lucky to have half a page of letters; now we often fill four or five pages. A couple of years ago I was desperately searching for material for each issue; now I find myself holding articles for six months or more through lack of space. I believe that *Vector*, along with the other BSFA magazines, is livelier than at any time since I joined the BSFA in 1977.

Any journal's editor carries the legal responsibility for its content and conduct, and, more importantly, is answerable to its readers, writers, publisher and staff. An editor who abuses this responsibility is likely to be sacked by the publisher — in our case, the BSFA, represented by its directors, the Council. I'm in regular touch with both the rest of the Committee (the executive arm of the Council) and the other five members of *Vector*'s editorial team; they quite rightly never hesitate to criticise me, but are also tremendously supportive. Without the whole team (and of course the writers) there wouldn't be a *Vector*.

But as a former *Matrix* editor and long-time stalwart of the BSFA reminded me recently, part of an editor's rôle is to impose his or her voice on the magazine. The *Vector* that I've edited for three years is different from the *Vectors* edited by Geoff Rippington, Kev Smith, Mike Dickinson, Dave Wingrove and Chris Fowler, which I read over the previous eight years. So far as I recall, all these editors were attacked at one time or another for being too political, or too erudite, or concentrating too much, or too little, on written SF rather than on other genre forms. One editor described as he resigned his constant battle with the then committee; he wanted quality criticism; they wanted down-market material.

The main criticism levelled at me (though by a tiny handful of members) is that of being too political. But I don't believe it's possible to separate out politics from SF (or from anything else). SF is a highly political literary genre; to read, review or discuss, for example, recent Heinlein, or Brunner's environmental-problem novels, or Brin's *The Postman*, or most Women's Press SF, without taking into account the political position of the authors, of the world they're writing about, and of the world they and we live in, is to miss much of the point, to be dreadfully unbalanced in one's analysis, and to do both writer and reader a disservice.

The personal position of a critic, as I pointed out in my *V142* editorial, is also important. This includes the critic's political and religious stance: compare a discussion of LeGuin's *The Dispossessed* by a Thatcherite and an anarchist, or of CS Lewis's Narnia books or Ransom trilogy by a Christian and a pagan. It's dishonest to pretend that one is neutral when one's political, religious and other beliefs obviously colour one's approach.

At the bottom of page 2 it has long said something along the lines of "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". Note well: the BSFA has *no* political stance. Individual members have.

As Trevor Jones said in *Matrix 74*, the BSFA, indeed, the SF world, contains a lot of minority or fringe groups. He complains about this, but I see it as a strength, a distinguishing feature, of SF writers, fandom, and the BSFA. I know Tory, Labour and Democrat supporters, Marxists, anarchists, Greens, evangelical Christians, Roman Catholics, pagans, feminists, male chauvinists, heterosexuals, male and female gays, transsexuals... Every one of these will have views which other members will violently disagree with, or deeply disapprove of. But for every one of them, their peculiar (in its true sense) beliefs colour the way they approach SF, what they read, and what they get out of it.

To say that members with a particular stance should not be allowed their say is bigoted, authoritarian censorship.

"I am a reasonable man" (I believe).

"My political/ religious/etc beliefs are well thought out and sensible and correct and right" (I believe).

"Therefore if I am right everybody else is wrong and should not be allowed to pollute these pages with their opinions."

NO!

One of the frequent failings of both the extreme Right and the extreme Left is the arrogance of setting the agenda, of saying "This is a given truth; there shall be no discussion of it; neither shall there be allowed any dissent from it." The same, sadly, also applies to, amongst others, some radical feminists and religious fundamentalists. It's not something I like to see in *Vector*.

Pastor Niemoeller once said:

First they came for the Jews
and I did not speak out —
because I was not a Jew.
Then they came for the communists
and I did not speak out —
because I was not a communist.
Then they came for the trade unionists
and I did not speak out —
because I was not a trade unionist.
Then they came for me —
and there was no one left
to speak out for me.

Members of minority or fringe or special interest groups (I include SF readers) should not spend their time attacking members of other groups for daring to be

different; Voltaire had it right: "I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it".

I am not a Marxist. Yet I recognise that an important strand of literary criticism is based on marxist principles. I don't know Mike Christie's political leanings, but his "HitchHiker's Guide to Lit Crit" in this issue would not exist if it were not for marxist thought. It's not up to me, or anyone else, to say "Thou shalt not bring thy marxist perspective to bear on this book".

A lot has been said about Nik Morton's survey in *Matrix 73*. If my maths is correct, the 12% response from 800 questionnaires comes to 96 replies, of whom 97.7% (i.e. 93.8 replies) stated they would renew their subscriptions; i.e. 2 wouldn't. What strikes me, as someone who frequently has to analyse and write on major professional surveys in the IT world, is that the one thing this shows is that we can't be doing *that* bad a job! Unfortunately Nik gives no statistical support for his more negative findings, so whether they too represent 97.7% of the membership, or whether they are the views of a couple of respondents who share his own opinions, I can't say. Most of you seem happy with *Vector*, *PI*, *Matrix* and *Focus*, from the letters and comments we receive; and if we set out to please *everyone* we'd end up with bland magazines that pleased no-one.

THE FUTURE

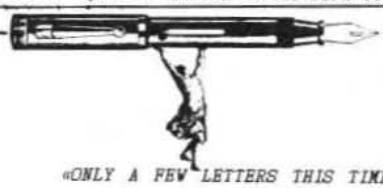
THE BURDEN OF EDITING *VECTOR* VARIES FROM ISSUE TO ISSUE — some are relatively easy; others, more often, I wonder why on earth I put in so much time and effort and heartache. And then the issue appears, and the letters arrive, and I know why.

I've already done more issues than any previous *Vector* editor (though some of those did *everything*, right up to addressing the envelopes). But there's still a lot I want to do with the magazine, and at the moment I'm planning to carry on for another year.

And in that year?

- Obviously more articles from you, the members; do write with suggestions.
- I'd like to get back to having regular articles from British SF and Fantasy authors — what I called "Albion Writ". Quite a number of authors are BSFA members: it's your books we review and discuss, and we'd like to hear more from you.
- Artwork. How many of you do really ace illustrations for fanzines? *Vector* needs your work! Everything from fillers to covers, and the more the merrier (if you prefer to illustrate a specific article, contact me first).
- Speaking of fanzines, I'd like to see closer links between the BSFA and fandom in general. So far as *Vector* is concerned, I know there are fans with incredibly detailed knowledge of particular authors, or series of books, or esoteric subjects. Will the Philip K Dick expert stand up? Or the fan who knows *everything* about Cthulhu? Or who's collected 257 novels and stories about invisible men? *Vector* can use your expertise.
- We've been able to showcase several new critical works over the last three years; if *you're* about to publish the definitive work on *The Mythic Significance of EE Doc Smith*, let me know.
- Advertising. To all the publishers who receive *Vector*, we give a lot of publicity to your books in our reviews and articles; we do also accept paid advertisements, and our rates have recently become extremely competitive! Contact Dave Wood (address on p 2).
- And publicity. Several members have complained that the BSFA doesn't publicise itself enough. We agree. The problem is that advertising costs money, and the BSFA, as always, is run on a very tight budget. But the best publicity has always been word of mouth, and this is where you can do your bit:
  - Most members must know someone who reads a hell of a lot of SF and Fantasy, but isn't a member. Persuade them to join!
  - If you write a letter or article about SF for another magazine or newspaper, or for radio or TV, give the BSFA a mention if you can.
  - Take a copy of *Vector* along to your local library or college library and ask if they'd like to subscribe — they'll probably never have heard of us, but the reviews in *Vector* and *PI*, if nothing else, will be invaluable to them in selecting which new titles to buy.

If we *all* pull our weight, the magazines will be better than ever, and the BSFA will be stronger than ever, with a far higher public profile, and real influence. And this can only be good for the British SF world.



LETTERS

«ONLY A FEW LETTERS THIS TIME, FOR A CHANGE — and no comments on the new letters layout! Still, there's plenty in this issue to spark debate, so please write as soon as possible. Letters received more than a month after the mailing are likely to be held over to the next-but-one issue, and so may lose topicality. Incidentally, we don't normally publish authors' addresses; otherwise, addresses go in unless you request not. Similarly, anything in a letter that you don't want publishing, just mark DNQ (Do Not Quote).»

ANDY MILLS
20 Luton Road, Hull, N Humberside HU5 5AJ

I LIKED COLIN GREENLAND'S SUCCINCT DISTINCTION BETWEEN reviewing and criticism, and his point that reviewing is a creative act in itself is a valid one. But — whilst I concede his experience and ability in this field is greater than mine — I would perhaps disagree with him on the content of a review, in that surely it is the reviewer's duty to make it possible for his or her readers to decide whether or not they should seek out the book in question. Yes, if the content of the review implies it, don't state "Buy/Don't buy". Often, however, a reviewer will mention both pros and cons in a work; without a final summing up the reader may be confused as to the book's worth in the eyes of the reviewer. Within the BSFA, for instance, this "service" the reviewer provides is especially important as regards works by first-time or little-known authors; people will buy the latest offerings by their favourite writers and ignore those by ones they dislike anyway, but they seek guidance when it comes to spending precious pounds on those they haven't met before.

KEV McVEIGH
37 Firs Road, Milnthorpe, Cumbria LA7 7QF

YOUR REVIEW FRAMEWORK DIAGRAM SEEMED TO SET OUT ALL the essential considerations for reviewers, but I note your inclusion of "do I dislike this type of work?" A point taken up later by Keith Brooke, to whom you reply that you have sometimes had your preconceptions overturned. A fair point, but surely to properly review a book it must be read by the right person. It is no good expecting an opinion on a horror novel from someone who would hate it even it were the greatest piece of horror writing of all time. Horror, or any other style, ought to be reviewed by a critic who dislikes the bad stuff but is prepared to appreciate the good stuff, otherwise the review is liable to give an inaccurate view.

On criticism, Alexander Pope wrote:

"Words are like leaves; and where they most abound,
Much fruit of sense beneath is rarely found."

An Essay on Criticism

To someone like me who has no knowledge of the theories mentioned, this quote could be applied to Mike Christie's article which appears to have upset Ken Lake so much. I

L E T T E R S

found the article largely incomprehensible, but that was, I feel, my failing, not the article's. I did enjoy and learn from almost all the remainder of your Feminism and SF issue.

Ken Lake however seems to have gone further. In his original letter he objects to "this issue devoted to feminism", and "articles that do not deal with SF subjects".

The issue as I saw it was actually Feminism & SF, a subject that should really be an ordinary regular part of SF as a whole, but every article had a direct relevance to SF or Fantasy. Can Ken Lake please explain how he thought there was no SF content in any of this? It was *all* SF.

I said Feminism should be part of SF's general consideration like all the rest of Ken's -isms, but this happens far too infrequently at the moment and so occasional isolating and emphasising of such things is needed to give it that little push back into our field of view. I believe that if we are restricted to an annual (?) feminist special *Vector* the results will be negative, but in the context of a general acceptance of feminism such specials do help to build momentum.

The Fred Pohl interview (*V142*) was very informative and it is good to see an old hand keeping up to date. I have not read *Chernobyl* yet, but I intend to; however, I wonder if its topicality will count against it very quickly. It seems to be the case that books produced to tie in with a current event are often dated almost before their release. Perhaps Chernobyl was such a major event that the book will have more staying power as the issue of nuclear power is debated repeatedly.

How about an article on artwork? In particular, how did Ian Brooks produce that incredible cover for *V141*?

> *«I'd love an article on SF & Fantasy artwork, either from a critic or from an artist, professional or amateur. I'm contacting several artists who haven't appeared in* Vector *recently, or at all, and hope that some of them will respond with artwork; anyone else who would like to submit artwork, please do — don't wait to be asked individually!»*

MIKE BRAIN
2 Paddock Way, Meadowcroft, Higher Kinnerton, Chester CH4 9BA

LIKE DAVID BARRETT IN *V143* (REVIEWS) I THOUGHT *WEAVEworld* was a good book, and I chose to read it after trying *The Damnation Game*. Perhaps it was the Fantasy content that made it special for me (as I don't really like Horror stories), and so in a sense it read almost like two intertwined (interwoven, perhaps?) novels. Clive Barker really has a talent for gut-wrenching grotesque imagery, but he could equally adapt his talent to straight Fantasy. In some ways the novel didn't develop enough, especially the magic power of Shadwell's coat lining, and Mimi's faerytale book was signalled early on in the plot as significant — but then hardly used. The avenging (almost robotic/alien) angel Scourge was superb. Perhaps Barker has left room for a sequel: is the Menstruum going to remember/resurrect a new Fugue and inhabitants?

Many appreciative thanks to Caroline Mullan for her view of SF & Fantasy in 1987. As to her final question — yes, she is well read, and will be even more so if she gets through her "May Read" selection of 50 books. I hope *Vector* will review or outline some of her "First Novel" list — which are SF and which Fantasy?

Thanks to the BSFA reviews, I have been alerted to, found and enjoyed new (to me) authors Patricia McKillip and Diana Wynne Jones. Given the chance, Wynne Jones could rival Terry Pratchett for humour and plot, if *Howl's Moving Castle* is an example.

I see Caroline Mullan will be reading John Crowley's *Ægypt* — well good luck I say, because I found most of it quite boring and didn't finish it. Perhaps it got better, but the only part I enjoyed was the "book within the novel" about young Shakespeare and Dr Dee.

As to the "Books of the Year" by your reviewers, it was good to see my favourite Terry Pratchett in five out of 15 people's choices. I also enjoyed the novels of Judith Tarr, Bob Shaw, Phillip Mann, Tim Powers and Geoff Ryman. My non-SF choice is Dorothy Dunnett's historical novel *The Spring of the Ram*.

> *«Many readers have said in the past how useful they find "Books of the Year" in pointing them to books they might otherwise have missed — very few members have the time or money to read dozens of new books as they appear. Caroline Mullan's article was of course based on the* Locus *lists of books published in the US last year; some have been reviewed in* Vector *already, and others will be in* Vector *or* Paperback Inferno *when they are published in the UK. So far as Ægypt is concerned, I'm just waiting for the next three volumes...»*

KEITH BROOKE
84 Eade Road, Norwich, Norfolk NR3 3EJ

THIS TIME I'LL BE BRIEF ABOUT HIGH-TECH, STREETWISE SF (often involving the transcendence of the current human form). I did intend to leave it this time, but I have to respond to accusations of writing "drivel without understanding" and — what was it? — oh yes, "doing everyone involved in the genre a disservice" (I hope you'll all forgive me!). No, I didn't deny that cyberpunk evolved from its predecessors, in fact it was a facetious comment to that effect (Doc Smith the father of cyberpunk!) that led to other accusations against me (I don't seem to be doing too well, do I?). All I said was that *the difference between New Wave and cyberpunk is enough to warrant them being treated as separate labels.* That's really a disservice? Oh well...

JOHN BRUNNER

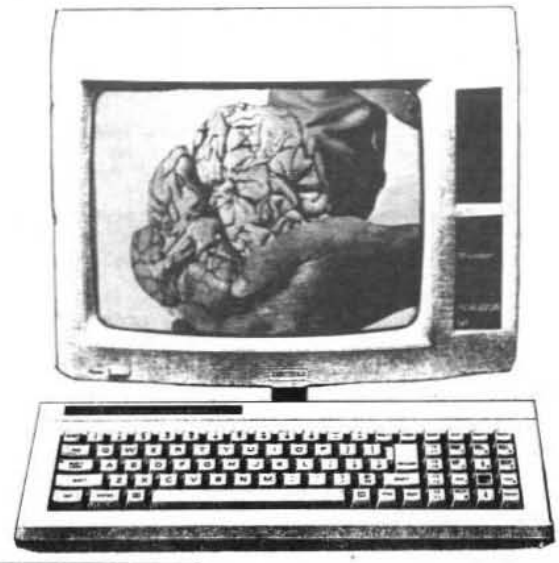
VECTOR 143 P 11 "BOOKS OF THE YEAR": FOR THE RECORD AND *pace* LJ Hurst, the guy with the SF fantasies in *The Fifty-Minute Hour* was almost certainly not Cordwainer Smith. Well though Lindner disguised it, I stumbled across his probable identity while doing research at the Patent Office Library in 1956. There had been a physicist working with the US Atomic Energy Commission who published a few papers around then, but suddenly vanished from the literature. His name? John Carter...

LJ HURST
7 Andrew Avenue, Ilkeston, Derby DE7 5EB

IN THE CRIME SECTION OF WATERSTONE'S MAIL ORDER CATALogue they have both the *Haunted Monastery/Chinese Maze Murders* omnibus and *The Celebrated Cases of Judge Dee* (ie translation of the Chinese original), both published by Dover. The first five of the Dee series (with the word "Chinese" in the title) all come with a detailed essay by van Gulik which readers may care to follow up. On the science side he also refers to Joseph Needham's *Science and Civilisation in China*, which I've discovered is a vast, as yet uncompleted, multiple-tome volume, some volumes of which, at least, are available in paperback.

SCHISM, MIRROR, LENS

KEN McVEIGH



Kev McVeigh examines what the writers — and the critics — have to say about the sub-genre of the late 80s, which (see the letter column of the last few issues) inspires devotion, distaste, and indifference in about equal degrees.

CYBERPUNK? OR CYBER JUNK? OPINIONS DIFFER AS TO what it was, is, or if it even existed. I suggest that there ought to be little doubt that it happened; what is in question is its status and importance. Was it just a nice easy label for a small stylistic group, useful only to reviewers and, mostly, publicity departments? Or is it the 80s New Wave, the movement that all SF needs to follow? Has it even been already superseded by something new?

I believe it was *Asimov's* magazine editor Gardner Dozois who *first* used the term "cyberpunk", but attempts at definition have come from all sides, with none of them really satisfactory. Using a dictionary I find "cybernetics" — the comparative study of control mechanisms of electronic and biological systems; and "punk" — decaying wood, worthless. However, if we take the modern connotation of punk as used to describe late 70s musical fashion, and apply cyber to control systems, from the Greek word *kubernasis* meaning pilot, are we any nearer? It would appear not.

Bruce Sterling has been one of the most vociferous champions of cyberpunk. In *Interzone 10* he called for "more clarity in prose" and "stories that can stand up to rough handling", then under his pseudonym of Vincent Omniaveritas he went further in *IZ 14*:

> It is a question of approach, of technique.
> And these are its trademarks:
> Technological literacy... as opposed to pseudo-science guff of past decades.
> Imaginative concentration... extrapolations thoroughly worked out... visionary intensity.
> A global, 21st century viewpoint not bound by the assumptions of middle-aged, middle-class, white American males.
> Fictional technique which takes the advances of the New Wave... yet asserting content over style.

So where does this New Science Fiction lead to, the people Michael Swanwick discussed in his article "A User's Guide to the Post-Moderns" (*Asimov's* August 1986)? Who are the cyberpunks? *The Independent* (17-10-87) referred to William Gibson as "the inventor and sole practitioner of cyberpunk", but Sterling in *Vector 138* listed Greg Bear, Pat Cadigan and himself. Other sources add John Shirley, Lewis Shiner, Michael Swanwick, Lucius Shepard, Kim Stanley Robinson and a few lesser names. This certainly begins to sound like a major movement in modern SF.

At the same time, however, there is another group occasionally called Humanists which is, according to Spinrad (*Asimov's*, Oct 87), the supposed antithesis of cyberpunk. These are described by various sources as including David Brin, John Varley — and Michael Swanwick and Kim Stanley Robinson (it would seem therefore that these two merit further examination).

Sterling mentions Robinson as a contemporary but not an ally, yet the interviewer, Paul Kincaid, draws out strong links in theme between the two. These similarities include a "strange ambivalent attitude towards America in so much contemporary American science fiction". Sterling admits this is his view, and mentions Robinson's *The Wild Shore* as a similar example. Less extreme versions of this theme appear in Jack McDevitt's *The Hercules Text*, and the basic view is descendent from the writings of Norman Spinrad, Harlan Ellison and particularly Philip K Dick. Spinrad looks at later novels by several of the new writers, and finds a great deal in common between Robinson's *A Memory of Whiteness* and Swanwick's *Vaccuum Flowers*, and also that a large portion of this work, which is gaining ascendancy within the genre, shares "a new conception of space colonisation" across the solar system in some cases. It looks from this angle that cyberpunk is not really much different from any of the other living sections of the genre.

Sterling has strong views, and has made claims about the ideology behind the cyberpunks; these are his grounds for rejecting Robinson, for instance. In fact Sterling tends towards the radical viewpoint, though he intermittently denies it. Greg Bear seems to me to be a long way right of the supposed cyberpunk stance, however. John Shirley is firmly anti-fascist in his novel *Eclipse*, and in *IZ 17* he echoes that, but condemns the choice between "Nationalism and Communist totalitarianism" that is forced upon us. On the other hand, Robinson and Brin have a quite liberal view, but none of these newer writers seems content with the state of the Union at present. Again this echoes the New Wave to some degree. Sterling goes on to say that he would probably be on the same side of the barricades as Heinlein, which shows that perhaps he, and cyberpunk as a whole, is not the revolutionary we are led to believe. It must of course be remembered that the American view of radicalism is a long way short of the British Left.

Style seems to be a large part of Omniaveritas's claims for the new science fiction, as well, though he has stressed the importance of content first. The work of Chandler is frequently cited, as is Ballard, but the first cyberpunk novel is frequently described as being Alfred Bester's *Tiger! Tiger!*, which in 1956 predated *Neuromancer* and its fellows by almost 30 years. It may be exaggeration about Bester, but more recently John Brunner's *The*

Shockwave Rider employs many of the mannerisms of cyberpunk, as does Ridley Scott's film *Blade Runner*.

Other influences exist, and need to be considered. Ken Lake describes Heinlein's *The Door into Summer* as "hardboiled Chandler narrative" in the same issue of *Vector* as Kincaid applies Chandler to Gibson and Sterling who denies it. John Clute has named TJ Bass and Ron Cobb and "the New York subway system graffiti matrix" as influences, and in *IZ 10* he was perhaps the first to mention James Tiptree Jr in this context. Jayne Anne Phillips has similarly been linked with Gibson — which all goes to imply that the cyberpunks are well read (like most writers) but that they don't have a firm style of their own. Indeed when other influences such as those I have listed and writers like Roger Zelazny and RA Lafferty are considered it certainly looks as if this is nothing new. One of the "cyberpunk sensations" is a writer whose novel, *Dr Adder*, was delayed for 10 years by publishers — KW Jeter.

Despite the similarities between *Dr Adder* and its companion *Glass Hammer*, and John Shirley's *Transmaniacon*, Jeter reacts angrily to being labelled a cyberpunk. His other work includes two modern horror novels, and an excellent Victorian Science Fantasy, *Infernal Devices*. In *IZ 22* he states that he has rewritten a current work, *Farewell Horizontal*, to move it away from the cyberpunk label. He says that "the label applies to a body of writing that is basically crap", then goes on to point out that the movement actually has more to do with yuppies than punks — "a tremendous orientation towards consumer goods". Sort of *Rebel without a Jacuzzi* perhaps? This is shown most clearly in the designer labelling of Gibson's stories — Ono-sendai decks and BMWs — and in the black market computer-assisted personality exchange/ psychoanalysis experiments of Pat Cadigan's *MindPlayers*. Cadigan moves away from the other cyberpunks a little by not placing the emphasis on the technology, as Gibson does, and in her avoidance of the dirt that others mix with the gloss. In fact she limits the gloss as well, most of the time.

A lot has been made of the street-credibility of cyberpunk, with particular reference to its "gutter-dialogue". What this seems to mean is that characters say "fuck" a lot. There is nothing wrong with this when done properly, and in many ways it is an improvement on Heinlein or Niven's imaginary swearwords, *Tanstaafl* and *Tanj*. This because the latter provided nice clean wholesome explanations of the expletives they threw around (There ain't no such thing as a free lunch, and There ain't no justice) which surely defeats their purpose. This use of language does not always work (as David Barrett has said, "it takes more than dog-turds to make back-alleys real"), but even when it does work it adds no innovation to language we have already seen from Ellison, Spinrad and Samuel R Delany.

Content-wise it might be possible to isolate cyberpunk more easily than by style: *cyber-* implies computers, so possibly the first novel to feature a program-inherent AI was Joseph H Delaney and Marc Stiegler's *Valentina*. Yet the punks in Richard Kadrey's *Metrophage* would struggle to program a microwave oven, let alone a cyberspace deck.

It's not just computers, of course, and one could hardly call *2001* a cyberpunk work for all its great qualities. There are no computers in Lucius Shepard's stories, nor in Sterling's début novel, *Involution Ocean*. Where there may be some link is in the nuclear future. Certainly Gibson, Sterling, Cadigan and others project a future where there appears to have been a significant scaling down of the nuclear threat, but this is not openly stated, and may be a false impression. In contrast, Sterling, Shepard, Swanwick, Brin and Robinson have all written post-holocaust work. It is this that some critics have seen as ideologically unsound, in particular *The Wild Shore* and Brin's *The Postman* have been criticised for this. Swanwick's *In the Drift* also points to some survival of a nuclear incident. Since it is difficult to conceive of a post-nuclear novel with *no* survivors this objection is flawed. Good writers use their settings to make other points within that setting.

The musical analogy with punk rock has been used frequently, and to take up this point John Shirley, who has played in several bands, says in *IZ 17*: "a more intense level of ideation, information input and imagery. It's also more contemporary in feel than the average science fiction. And probably more energetic. And that is like punk."

Bradley Denton takes this to its extreme in *Wrack'n'roll*, but is somehow unconvincing, as is the whole analogy. Jeter has mentioned the yuppie aspect, whilst the cyberpunk panel at Novacon 16 decayed into a debate about how little the punks and the hippies achieved. And so has cyberpunk failed to succeed the New Wave, which in its turn had failed to overthrow the Old Guard.

For not only is most of punk no longer contemporary (and some of it never was), but as Shirley hinted, it did not begin with the Damned and the Sex Pistols in 1976 (or Black Flag and the Dead Kennedys in the US). For

once California was way behind the trend, as punk grew out of the Stones and the Who in the UK, the Doors, Andy Warhol's Velvet Underground, and Iggy Pop in New York; the same can be said of cyberpunk, which came from the New Wave, with help from David Bowie's *Diamond Dogs*, *Heavy Metal* magazine, and films like *Escape from New York*, according to Gibson, who has also mentioned *Blade Runner* in this context.

Fashion-wise punk is often described as post-apocalyptic, something which shows clearly in George RR Martin's *The Armageddon Rag*, despite its pre-punk references, and in the setting and styles of Storm Constantine's *Wraeththu*.

So these roots have influenced other strong and valid forms of the genre. The reliance of Shirley, and others, on music in their work too often reads as an apologia, or merely a gratuitous namecheck for favourite bands. Stephen King has been doing this for years, most blatantly in *Christine*, and in asking AC/DC to provide music for *Maximum Overdrive*.

Some of the cyberpunk supporters will be leaping to defend themselves; they may question my references to Ellison, Delany *et al*, yet they accept the attachment of Bester, Ballard and Tiptree, to name three from whom it is a very small step to the New Wave. Terry Dowling, in his introduction to *The Essential Ellison* and the section labelled "Roccoco Technology", talks of "bridges across the abyss" as the effect of real radical SF, like *Neuromancer*. Ellison's "Along the Scenic Route", to take one of many examples, is "only ostensibly a gadget story... what technology is doing to us." The high-tech gloss merely decorates the message. What could be more cyberpunk, then, than "I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream" or "'Repent, Harlequin!' Said the Ticktockman" yet at the same time not cyberpunk?

There is another link with Ellison *et al*: collaborations, of which Harlan Ellison did many, including an entire collection, *Partners in Wonder*. In similar fashion Gibson writes with Sterling, Shirley and Swanwick in his collection *Burning Chrome*, whilst Sterling and Shirley produced *The Unfolding* together for *IZ 11*.

This spirit is hardly unique to cyberpunk though; Pohl & Kornbluth, Kuttner & Moore, Niven & Pournelle, come most readily to mind. It may be that the youth of so many of these new writers is encouraging such experimenting, which seems to be especially strong amongst the Texas area writers such as Sterling, Cadigan, Lisa Tuttle, George RR Martin, Howard Waldrop and the late Tom Reamy. These writers all worked together to help each other develop as writers. Undoubtedly a "good thing", it is equally certain not a "cyberpunk thing".

So we see that each new attempt at defining cyberpunk brings in someone new and rejects as many from previous versions. Where then does this leave us? Our first definition from Vincent Omniaveritas has provided the most detailed set of "rules" for the movement; yet has he, the theoretical guru of cyberpunk (Spinrad's phrase) got it wrong as well?

We keep returning to *Neuromancer* because it won so many awards and is the most widely read of the works in question, but it has been said that it, and its sequel *Count Zero*, are factually very inaccurate about computers. Rudy Rucker dismisses this in *IZ 20*: "I think it's a stupid argument." His point is that the errors are irrelevant, and the critics are missing the essence of the book. This is true, of course, except within the framework laid down by Omniaveritas, where it violates the "First Law", forbidding pseudoscience guff. These same guidelines later refer to non-male, non-white viewpoints, but with Pat Cadigan as the token female and no coloured writers that come readily to mind, this all sounds a little unreliable. The ideals are nice but are the writers up to it?

Seeing all this leads to the conclusion that there is no great new movement anywhere in SF at present; not cyberpunk, or the Humanists; just the usual new waves that come along with each new story or novel. Tiny ripples mostly. Cyberpunk had a good standard bearer in *Neuromancer*, and great hype from Bruce Sterling, but so many of its stars are denying it, notably Gibson, Bear, Jeter and Rucker, and Lucius Shepard rapidly discards the cyberpunk trappings of stories like "Dancing it all away at Nadoka" in his new novel, *Life during Wartime*, in favour of Humanist stylings and ideas. Even Sterling, who produced cyberpunk like *Schismatrix*, has left it behind with the recent story "The Little Magic Shop".

Almost all the writers who have been linked with cyberpunk have written as much that isn't; personally I await what William Gibson offers us after *Mona Lisa Overdrive*, which may be a collaboration with Sterling in an historically set "steam-punk" novel à la Tim Powers, James P Blaylock and KW Jeter, *The Difference Engine*.

Perhaps we should heed Omniaveritas, who said this in *PI 52*: "Don't expect a new New Wave... if these writers are ever singled out as 'revolutionaries' it will mean their defeat."

Gibson in *Frontier Crossings* (the Conspiracy souvenir book) refers to "this 'movement'... or 'sub-genre' or whatever it's supposed to be."

For all the hype it is still the case that cyberpunk is just another small amorphous lump of science fiction, as valid as any other but no more so. It is Orson Scott Card, Tim Powers, John Varley and so on who are producing many of the major works of recent SF.

Nor does cyberpunk appear to have spread to Britain, Mike Cobley and Charles Stross apart, and Sterling has mentioned this need to be accepted, "otherwise it will remain a clique situation, whereas I feel that science fiction is in need of multiple viewpoints. We do need Britain."

The new British authors Iain Banks, Gwyneth Jones, Storm Constantine, Paul J McAuley and Geoff Ryman are all pursuing different lines. Again this echoes the New Wave: where Ellison and Delany fought taboos, Priest and Ballard explored style. Certainly there is more than this but the separate development of the two streams develops into the 80s.

A final comment, on the cyberpunk anthology: why *Mirrorshades*? They hide the eyes, our one window onto the soul. Have the cyberpunks got something to hide? An empty soul perhaps? Or just the same soul as the rest of science fiction? One thing alone separates cyberpunk, and that has been the hype supporting it, which is something else picked up from music. Perhaps we need somebody to actually write it, or something as radical as Sterling claims, though since he so often contradicts his selves his views should be treated with scepticism anyway. All the books I have mentioned are good SF, and a few are great fiction, but nowhere is there anything worth calling a "movement". I hear rumours of a cyberpunk-oriented RPG (rôle-playing game) being written, which may be quite welcome radicalism in that genre, but otherwise the writers are still writing, the readers still reading, and the hype moves on to something new.

Cyberpunk's sole feature so far is all the talk about it, so I'll close here and let it go away.

Editor's note: Kev McVeigh expanded this from his original letter at my request.

YOU BLANKETY SWINE...!

ONE OF THE BEST WAYS OF LEARNING IS BY EXAMPLE. David Garnett looks at a new novel by comedian Les Dawson -- "I have never read anything as bad for years" -- as an example of how NOT to do it.

HOW NOT TO WRITE A NOVEL

DAVID GARNETT

THERE HAS BEEN A LONG TRADITION OF COMEDIANS WRITING science fiction -- and I'm not talking of people like L Ron Hubbard. Most of these stories would be justifiably forgotten if their authors were not so famous in their primary profession. The only time Buster Keaton's true voice was heard was in his contributions to *Amazing*; and when one considers WC Fields's stories in the "Golden Age" of *Astounding*, it is obvious why he is best remembered for his movies. One of the stalwarts of Moorcock's *New Worlds* was of course Marty Feldman, and lately there have been Ben Elton's manic vignettes in *Interzone*.

Now Les Dawson joins this elite group with his novel *A Time Before Genesis*. Dawson is one of those comedians you either love or hate -- or are totally indifferent to. No one who has seen him on television can fail to have noticed his impromptu lexicographic farragos, a sure sign of his love of language -- which is essential for any writer.

I first became aware of Dawson's writing in the seventies, when he had pieces in magazines such as *Men Only* and *Penthouse* -- humorous articles which had the rare distinction of being funny. So when I saw his first novel on sale, I bought it. First novels are said to be autobiographical, and *A Card For the Clubs* certainly was. It was a perceptive and witty book about a small time comedian. Dawson's second novel was much less successful. This was *The Spy Who Came*, and even a decade ago it was out of date in satirising the sub-James Bond spy novels which had flourished several years earlier. By "less successful" I mean it wasn't as funny -- and funny books are what we expect from comedians.

A Time Before Genesis, however, isn't meant to be amusing. It's obvious that the author considers it a significant novel. The subtitle is: *A novel of the future's past*. And the second line of the book's dedication reads: "Of course, I also dedicate it to all those people who like to question, and to think for themselves."

There are two basic approaches when writing any kind of fiction -- to know everything about the subject, or nothing. Often an outsider to science fiction, coming in from a new direction, can offer a completely radical perspective. Les Dawson, I think it's safe to say, has never subscribed to *Analog*, has never attempted to read a Van Vogt novel, has never been a member of the BSFA. So he's arriving fresh on the scene, believing his ideas are stunningly new.

It's very difficult to write a book -- and very simple to tear one to pieces with a few glib phrases. Face to face criticism at a workshop offers the author a fair chance to answer back, but publication gives the reviewer an unreasonable advantage: if the author replies in print, it seems like whingeing. That's one reason why I promised I would never again write any criticism. But it was only a promise to myself, so it doesn't count...

This has been a long introduction, because I keep postponing what has to be said, and trying to think of a more subtle way of saying: this book is appallingly awful. I have never read anything as bad for years -- or not all the way through. And although it's fairly short, it reads like the most interminable of trilogies.

Normally, I would have given up after a few pages, but I persevered because books like this are of importance to any writer. They teach two valuable lessons: first, how not to write a book; and second, that even the most dreadful books get published.

> cripple my intellect. I simply want enough time to set down the full story of what happened . . . a story of isolated threads that eventually became woven into a tapestry of horror that destroys any likelihood of salvation for Man's soul.
>
> My problem is how to set out the full story without it sounding like the ramblings of a near idiot . . . . In the name of God, how do I take a measurement from a Pyramid, marry it with a theory about holes in the world, add the truth about a man who still lives after two centuries, and expect to convince an ailing civilisation that our days as an effective life force are numbered?

Maybe *A Time Before Genesis* could be classified as fantasy, because the explicit theme is the conflict between good and evil, the latter of course being represented by dark forces -- suitably capitalised as Dark Forces. But as these forces are also aliens, the novel must regrettably be called science fiction.

This is a book which has everything. Every seemingly crackpot theory dreamed up by von Daniken, Charles Fort and Velikovsky has been synthesised into a unified theory by Dawson's unique apocalyptic vision. The Pyramids, tunnels through the world, vampires, Tibetan monks, immortality, devil worship. Everything and everyone: Hitler and Churchill, Aleister Crowley and Jesus, Rasputin and Marilyn Monroe, Martin Borman and Harold Wilson. This is a book which takes us from Atlantis to Glastonbury, from Golgotha to Huddersfield.

It starts with a *Prologue*, which like all good (as opposed to evil) prologues is printed in italics. This is where the novel's title comes in, because the first line starts "Before the Beginning..." Then we get some stuff about the Masters and the Force (not sure about the origin of that word), which isn't very clear -- and becomes even less apparent as the book goes on.

Then comes *Dateline Dallas...1963*. The first sentences read: "The Presidential aeroship shimmered and glistened as the furnace heat of the Texas sun bled its rays in wavering contours across the metallic skin of the craft. As the pilot commenced his descent in a languid spiral..."

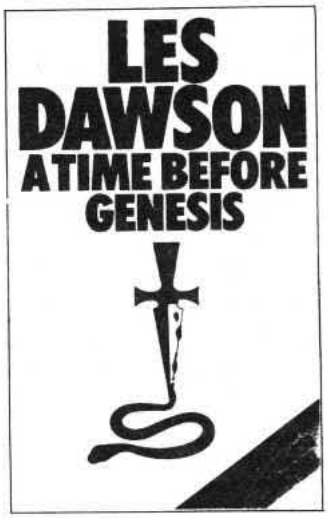
Despite getting lost in the description, it seems as though President Kennedy is flying in a craft called an aeroship which has to spiral down in order to land -- from which one can only conclude that we are in an alternate universe. The breathtaking subtlety of Dawson's parallel Earth, so similar to our own, becomes more impressive later on.

As in our own world, Kennedy is assassinated, "The Masters were pleased", and then the next chapter is set in 1995. This is the first *Testimony of David Gates*. (We're still only on page 6.) And here we first come across one

of the major structural faults of the book: most of it is written in the first person -- by several different people. All of whom write and talk exactly the same way. There's also *The Testimony of John Mason* (which later becomes *John Mason's Diary*), *The Testimony of Sister Ruth*, *The Journal of Edmund Torrance*, *HV Potter's Transcript*, and *The Templar Memorandum*.

Gates is the main character in the story, and his "testimony" starts with several pages on the conditions which exist in Britain after "the end of the Eighties, when the Conservative government fell." (If only...!) This is the traditional method for a lazy writer to add background information instead of letting the details filter through the narrative flow. Dawson's Britain is the stereotyped nightmare left wing state, where pubs have been nationalised, parking is banned in city centres, babies are eaten (that's in Scotland, which even in the Dawson continuum is a centre for socialism), and "one popular cabaret comedian told a joke about the size of his wife... and was imprisoned for six months." The usual kind of thing. But the rest of the world is also going to hell -- literally, because Gates believes that the anti-Christ will arrive in 1998.

Gates is a newspaper reporter who begins writing about the Kennedy assassination, and his articles "created quite a shock wave... the American authorities had demanded that I cease them." In Dawson's alternate world, it seems that Gates is the only person in over thirty years to realise that there was something strange about the assassination -- that it was all too neat, Lee Harvey Oswald murdering Kennedy and then being killed by Jack Ruby. Gates finds out from one of Kennedy's security men that the President's closest adviser was a guy called Roman, and at a speech in Dallas Kennedy intended to expose Roman and reveal how the world and its inhabitants are manipulated by aliens -- but he was stupid enough to tell Roman this, hence his "date with Death".



Books like this are of importance to any writer.
They teach:
1.
How not to write a book
2.
That even the most dreadful books get published

Gates finds the security man's mutilated body (the first of many in the book), and then the baddies grab him. But Gates has already discovered the secret: he knows that the world is being run by aliens. So what do they do? These hell-spawned creatures who have tortured and slaughtered across the centuries, who can destroy the world's most powerful man with impunity. Do they kill Gates? Of course not, because that would mean there would be no book. Instead *they crush one of his fingertips with a pair of pliers!* The diabolic fiends...

No wonder he retires to a provincial newspaper in Huddersfield.

And we're only on page 19 yet.

Dawson's writing is competent but uninspired, and is oddly old-fashioned. Everyone refers to their enemies as being "swine" or, when they're really angry, "filthy swine" -- although sometimes there are variations like "vile pig". When a nurse tries to murder Gates, she attacks him with a surgeon's scalpel, to a cry of "Die, you swine!" It would have been nice to have just one "fucking bastard" in there for variety. Another example of the dated style is when someone's lover is referred to as their "swain" -- not, of course, to be confused with "swine".

Dawson neglects to include the classic line "with one bound I was free." Instead, when John Mason is attacked by one of the demon horde, he falls to the floor and his assailant rushes at him with a knife. "I had no other recourse than to pull out my old service revolver." Just like that. Where does the pistol come from? (Knives, scalpels -- the bad guys don't have much in the way of weapons.)

Okay, time for some kind of synopsis: there's a handful of men called the Crusaders (although Templar doesn't seem to be one). These include Mason, Torrance, Peter Kent, Matthew Amis, Simon Grant, Jason Forbes and Kurt Vogel. (Kurt Vogel? What's he doing in there?) Gates joins them in their fight against Roman and his gang, the British subsidiary of which is led by a guy called Marchment. He's a bureaucrat at heart, because he sends out memos (*The Marchment Memorandum*) to the rest of his staff -- the other Satan worshippers, I mean -- about the death of "the pig" Mason and how they intend to kill "the swine" Gates.

Roman is an immortal. Before being an adviser to Kennedy, he had the same job with Hitler: Roman was Martin Borman. Apparently, Adolf was quite a nice chap until he met up with Borman, which in this alternative world was only in 1938. The British equivalent of Roman is a fellow named Farrow, who always turns up to interfere. He made Eden withdraw British troops from Suez; he was there when Wilson banned arms sales to South Africa. See the depths to which the forces of the anti-Christ will descend?

I read this book with growing frustration, annoyance and anger, searching for a trace of merit. There had to be something somewhere -- anything anywhere -- to justify its publication. But it's badly constructed and badly told, sketchily characterised, repetitious and dull, without any drama or suspense.

Important scenes, such as the murders of Mason and Torrance, are missing. Becuase so much of the book is written in the first person, they can't describe their own deaths (even Dawson realises this). But neither does anyone else -- there are just brief references to the fact that they have been killed by the forces of darkness, without any details. This is far worse in the case of David Gates. He's the main protagonist, but he vanishes on page 150. Only later do we discover that he's also dead. From page 151, the rest of the narrative is told mostly by Mark Templar -- a new character, whose name was only briefly mentioned 60 pages earlier.

The book is riddled with inconsistencies, from the minor to the major. The author hasn't thought through what he's writing about; there is no clarity of vision. The barter system has returned, so what's the going rate for a copy of the newspaper Gates now works on? Central to the plot -- and I use the word "plot" very loosely -- is a book by HV Potter entitled *Fairies in the Garden*. (I swear I'm not making any of this up.) Copies are difficult to find, because the satanists are destroying them and mutilating their owners. (Although not, it seems, as the ultimate literary sanction.) References are made to a "dusty copy" of this elusive and out of print volume. But later we find that no publisher was sought until after Potter's death -- which was only a couple of years previously. (He was murdered and mutilated, of course.)

All is explained by *The Book of T'Seng*, where we find out about the aliens. This is a huge chunk of exposition, the core of the book -- and it's here that things really go crazy. We discover what happened in the distant past, what is happening now, and what will happen in the future if the Masters have their wicked way. I admit that by now my attention was less than riveted, but it seems Earth is a spaceship and was originally populated with creatures made by the aliens -- humans. Mercury and Venus were also interstellar craft, similarly inhabited. But it was so hot

on Mercury "that the skins of the clones became thicker and blacker in order to survive the radiation"; and on Venus "the skin formed a yellow hue to offset the effects of hydrogen... vision was impaired, the eyes of the clones narrowed and eventually slanted." So when the Martians and Venusians were transferred to Earth, guess which continents they were sent to...?

Anyhow, the aliens created mankind so that later they could feed off the evil they produced. I think. Seems a lot of trouble to go to for a meal, but never mind.

Fairies in the Garden appears to be a children's book; but the real story is written in code -- a code so complex that the dark forces have never worked it out, but Gates succeeds almost immediately. And what does it say? That Potter's wife had a baby who is the reincarnation of Christ. (Jesus -- the original -- didn't die on the cross, but in Kashmir, on his way to Tibet.) Potter gives no evidence for the child's divinity. Maybe his wife told him he was the son of God, knowing how gullible her husband was. (He thought that Hitler was just one of the lads until he fell under Roman's bad influence.) And even when the kid was born, no kings turned up for the occasion -- although this was before the dawn of the socialist utopia, when presumably all monarchs were eaten -- and neither did any shepherds.

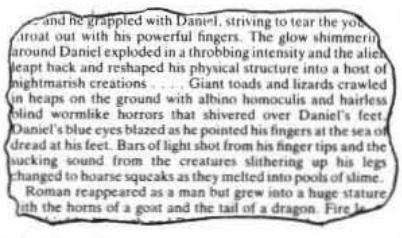
The Potters call their son Daniel, and realise they have to hide him because the villains are close. How do they know? Because when Roman takes a house nearby, he uses his own name. Potter sends Daniel off to private school -- monastery, I mean, because they haven't been nationalised yet -- where Templar is very impressed with the kid's wisdom. (Although he sounds like a smart-arsed little git.) He's tall, blue-eyed. Blonde?

Meanwhile, almost everyone else dies and is most likely mutilated. Then comes *Armageddon* -- what the whole book has been leading up to. (Dawson's book, not the Bible -- the Bible is the devil's work: the Ten Commandments are "a totally unacceptable guide or standard to a behaviour pattern.") Armageddon takes place at Glastonbury in 1998, and is a bit of an anti-climax -- although after so many thousands of years, that's almost inevitable. The confrontation between Roman (who is really Satan) and Daniel (Jesus Part 2) is a bit like the magic duel between Boris Karloff and Vincent Price in the movie *The Raven* -- although far less interesting.

"'Die, son of the Man pig,' Roman roared as suddenly a long bladed sword sprang into his gnarled and twisted hands."

But Daniel has an ally, his dad: "The skies were rent asunder by a vast ball of light that illuminated the whole countryside... Roman shrank under the incredible light and he screamed as his body began to burn."

It's all over. But not the book. Not yet. After Satan has been snuffed out, it's paradise on earth. Everyone's having a great time -- so no one works, food runs out, and almost the entire population dies. It's back to the caves for the survivors, until *Millenia Hence* more aliens arrive on Earth -- and leave behind fire...



You may think that I've revealed too much about this literary masterpiece and spoiled it for your potential reading pleasure. But believe me, there's far more to it than can be considered in such a brief critique as this.

Les Dawson earns more appearing on a single half hour of *Blankety Blank* than he can have been paid for this book, and it must have taken him much more time and effort to write it -- even more than it does to read it -- and I admire him for the fact that he took the trouble to do so.

But it should never have been inflicted upon an unsuspecting world -- and for that, the publisher must take the blame.

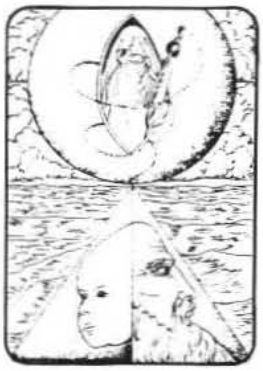
A Time Before Genesis can only have been published because of who Dawson is. But who is it meant for? People who like Les Dawson, who have read the novel because of what they have seen of him on television, will be very disappointed and confused. (Not that this is a bad thing: expectations and preconceptions should be shaken up whenever possible, but this could put people off reading anything more intellectual than *The Sun* forever.) "In the nightmarish tradition of James Herbert," quotes the blurb -- but anyone hoping for a reasonable commercial book won't find it here. And those who want even more, who anticipate a well written, well told, imaginative story -- which should be the basic requirements of any novel -- will also feel cheated.

Editors are supposed to edit. The editor at Elm Tree should have had the guts to tell Dawson everything that was wrong with the book -- and that everything was wrong with the book -- to advise him to go back and think more clearly about his themes, his plotting, his characters, the basics of storytelling. The easiest way to improve the manuscript would have been to start a bonfire with it.

You tried, Les, and you failed. It's a pity your failure had to be so public.

Although one of the biggest mysteries in the novel was why HV Potter wrote *Fairies in the Garden*, and why the satanists wanted to decode/destroy it, an even bigger mystery was who would have published it -- but I suppose Elm Tree would...

Editor's Note: At first I thought David had invented this book; then I thought, Nothing can really be this bad. I was wrong on both counts.



MERLIN AND WOMAN

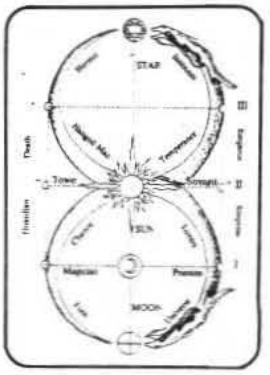
Merlin and Story Telling

by R.J. Stewart

Story telling was a feature of the Second Merlin Conference. Contributors read stories from their books or unpublished material and also improvised tales (often with suprising results) before an attentive audience. Stories were told by a wide range of tellers and methods, beginning with improvisations by film director John Boorman, followed by John Matthews, myself, and an unnamed person who stepped out of the audience and told a vivid tale of prehistory and ritual sacrifice. One of the improvised tales was taken up by Rachel Pollack, who added to it and expanded upon it, whereupon a number of connectives were made by other tale tellers with hilarious results. Much of this was a matter of the moment, of performance, and would not necessarily work in written form.

At the opposite extreme, masterly contributions were made by Peter Vansittart and Peter Dickinson, each reading from his published or soon to be published works to an attentive theatre audience; and between improvisation and formal inspired writing came one of the more curious story-telling arts which is now reappearing in the twentieth century. Rachel Pollack created a story (see Part Four) by drawing a pattern of tarot cards. This method of using tarot is perhaps the true essence of such images, and the relatively modern methods of 'fortune telling' are really derivatives of the primal image-generating and story-telling function of the cards.

MERLIN is one of the great figures in British mythic history, of interest to many SF and Fantasy readers. These extracts and illustrations are reproduced with thanks from *Merlin and Woman*, edited by RJ Stewart, published this month by Blandford Press (183pp, £12.95). The book is based on papers presented at the second Merlin Conference, held in London in June 1987. Illustrations are by Miranda Gray.



Merlin was, of course, a story teller. In the *Prophecies* we find him relating the story of the future history of Britain, and finally describing the apocalyptic (but not orthodox Christian) end of the universe. No greater story exists, and as Merlin foresaw all things, he therefore knows all stories. We find this aspect of Merlin portrayed strongly in John Boorman's film *Excalibur*, where the prophet is almost bored by human endeavour, but deeply shocked when the bright spirit of young Arthur steps beyond the frame of the original story and so creates a new branch of reality or a new world.

On a more historical level, we know that Merlin, as a title, person or legend, is somehow involved in bardic arts. It seems very likely that Geoffrey of Monmouth, almost the first writer to set out the Merlin legends and prophecies from oral tradition, drew much of his material from Welsh or Breton bards. Thus Merlin was originally found within an oral organic tradition of tale telling, and this is where the images now known as 'tarot' come into the picture. Such images, deriving from myth, legend and the Elemental world-view of ancient cultures, were the basic substance of the Merlin tales.

Little wonder that story telling should be associated with Merlin, not merely through the roots of tarot found in the medieval Merlin texts, but in his role as primal prophet of the land, teller of the great story of all life.

The Merlin Conference began as an event in which a small number of specialist authors read and published papers on aspects of Merlin in literature and tradition which were not generally known. Within a year this expanded into a combination of talks, drama, film and story telling. The expansion was not one of ambition, but of inevitable growth from the primal roots of the Merlin tradition.

If we are to restore Merlin to a proper place in the imagination, rather than relegate him to the dreary stereotype of the pseudo-wise elder (so beloved of both academics and spiritualists), we need to allow him space to tell his own tale.

No social gathering, of course, can possibly contain that tale, for it runs from the Creation of the Land to the End of the Solar System, as described in the *Prophecies*. Between these extremes there is a vast cycle of adventures found in the *Vita* and later Arthurian texts, with many modern restatements still appearing. Similarly no single book or series of books can represent Merlin's tale, for much of it has not yet happened as far as we are concerned; but we can gather together various stories, researches, and insights, all of which help us to attune to the greater mystery or the Great Story. The secret is in the blending of research, evidence, and imagination; and this is a type of alchemy which has been sought out by the various contributors to this second 'Book of Merlin'.

The Sleep of Albion

by Kathleen Raine

There is, in the treasury of every nation, a body of mythology, legend and folklore, interwoven with history and pre-history, associated with certain places and the names of kings and heroes, with events natural and supernatural, preserved by tradition both oral and recorded. These legends and records belong to the whole people, lending to each brief, unremarkable life a larger identity and participation, as if in some sense these stories were our own. They give us a place in history – and not merely in history but in a story whose imaginative meaning goes beyond history, lending a sense of glory and cosmic significance, and a beauty special to our own people and place on earth. Therefore we are considering a mass of material which, although it may have its basis in actual events, in real men and women who lived and loved and battled and quested, and who may very well be buried in the sites associated with them, eludes the kind of factual proof or disproof nowadays so popular with the excavators and researchers, all the error-proof techniques which modern fact finding demands. That the stories have been told and re-told is the only certain fact about them.

Such is what is known as the 'Matter of Britain', the corpus of British history and pre-history, as it has been handed down, and so designated in distinction from the 'Matter of Rome', established in the legends of the founding of the city of Romulus and Remus, fostered by the she-wolf, fit nurse of Rome's military genius; and the story of the conquest of Aeneas, refugee from Troy. France's 'matter' centres round Charlemagne and his knights; and the Teutonic nations likewise have their legendary history interwoven with myth and miracle – all those themes of Odin and Asgard, Siegfried and Parsifal which Wagner recreated in his opera.

The Matter of Britain, too, traces our origin back to Troy through the legendary Brut, who is said to have founded his kingdom in these isles; but also has roots in the prehistory and myths of the most ancient indigenous Celtic peoples, a marvellous mingling of Christian and pre-Christian themes.

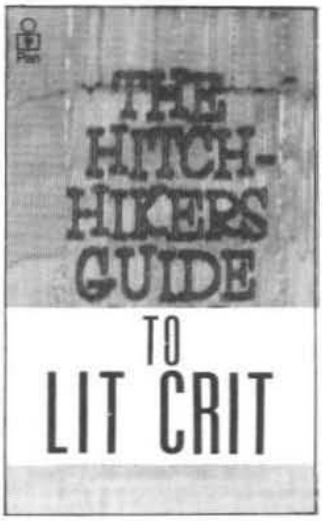
Contents

Above all the Matter of Britain centres about a fifth-century Romanised British king or war leader, King Arthur, his chivalry, his court at Camelot, his round table, and the mysterious sanctity, neither wholly Christian nor wholly pagan, of the Holy Grail and its Quest. Doubtless there was a historical personage, a leader of cavalry as introduced and used by the Romans, at a time when the Saxon invaders fought on foot. Perhaps there was a Battle of Badon Hill in which the Saxons on foot were routed by a smaller number of mounted cavalry. There may even have been a Round Table, whether at Glastonbury or elsewhere, long turned to dust. But Arthur, the 'once and future king' of Britain, is far greater than any historical personage who may once have borne that name. Indeed the disentangling of the basis of historical fact from the whole tradition and literature of Arthur, his knights and his round table, would be an exercise in reductionism which could serve only to make him less 'real' as a presence, an archetype of kingship within the national imagination of the British people.

Rather than what remains when legend has been stripped away, King Arthur is the sum of all that has been recorded and imagined, written, told, sung and believed. He is a creation of, and a presence in, the national imagination, which has from century to century – even to the present day – continued to adorn Arthur and his court with all those attributes we would most wish to find in the person and circumstances of the perfect king. Arthur embodies the virtues of justice, fortitude, prudence and magnanimity as the British have conceived them; he commands the loyalty of knights of prowess, and establishes peace in his regions. Arthur's court, moving from place to place, confers its half-rustic splendour on these places where its joyous contests in arms and festivals shed a kind of beauty still somehow recognisably and specifically British, where good manners go hand in hand with good cheer.

Myths and legends do not embody merely high ideals and things as moralists think they should be, however; the imagination of a race is much richer than that, and more mysterious. Arthur's marriage with Guinevere was flawed by the Queen's love for Launcelot du Lac, and by this knight's divided loyalty. Love, as is usually so in mythological stories, obeys laws of its own – Guinevere with her feminine un-law-abidingness is queen by right of that very independence of the moral law which she shares with Ireland's Queen Maeve, and Isolde, Queen of Cornwall, and with many a goddess. The Eternal Feminine is above, or beneath, or at all events outside all those laws, however admirable, that kings and law makers establish. Indeed the figures constellated about Arthur are scarcely less potent than the king himself – Gawain and Perceval and the other knights of the Grail quest; and Merlin the magician, type of the magical knowledge of the pre-Christian world, educator and adviser of the king. Merlin too is outside human law and order, reminding us that human rule is only relative and itself comprehended within a mystery which the magician may mediate but which neither he nor any human power can control. That kingship is itself decreed and bestowed by higher powers is implicit in that other familiar Arthurian story of the sword in the stone which could only be withdrawn by the divinely appointed heir to the kingdom.

Finally there is the legend of Arthur's death-sleep, somewhere in a secret cave where, with his knights around him, he awaits the time when he will return to restore just rule to his kingdom and to repel its enemies. It is above all this tradition of the sleeper who will wake at the time of need which lives on in the English imagination.



MIKE CHRISTIE

GET SCIENCE FICTION OUT OF THE CLASSROOM AND BACK in the gutter where it belongs." Sam Moskowitz found that written on the blackboard when he arrived to give a lecture in the early days of academic SF criticism. It sums up perfectly the commonsense argument that most readers would make when asked what they think of literary theory.

Take one of these average readers — you may be one yourself. They would say something like: "I don't need to analyse SF to know I like it. I just read the stuff. What's the use of a theory telling me something I already know — that I like Asimov and don't like Brin? What possible use is literary theory? — and it's all quite irrelevant to SF anyway."

I believe that literary theory can be invaluable to every reader, and that an SF reader can gain a lot of pleasure from understanding not just how an individual book or story works, but the historical framework it fits into, and the relationship that fiction has with the real world. The fact that we do most of our reading within a genre is no reason for us not to try to gain insights into the way the fiction we love works.

Gaining insights, however, has not always been the purpose of literary criticism. Matthew Arnold, for example, wanted literature to be a substitute for religion.

I blinked the first time I read that, but it turned out to be true. He saw the rise of the working class as a direct threat to the rule of the upper class. What if the plebs should realize they held all the cards and decided to start winning a few tricks with them? Arnold, a hundred years ago, in the aftermath of the Industrial Revolution, had figured out the equations of power in Victorian society a lot more clearly than many since, and he quite unhypocritically decided that what would best serve the ruling classes was to brainwash the masses. And literature was the tool he chose to do it.

It starts to sound like some Victorian melodrama. The evil Jasper, son of the local squire, will foully sabotage young goodhearted workingclass lad Tom's brave attempt to carve a niche in society for himself, and probably win Tom's girl in the process. And how does Jasper do it? Well, er... he hands Tom a copy of Keats.

Surely leftist paranoia. Just how was it all supposed to work? Let us see what Arnold might have made of a certain well-known work of SF, had he had the chance:

> *Prostetnik Vogon Jeltz is the symbol of crudeness, of small-mindedness, in this novel. His ill-fated attempts at poetry merely reinforce our conviction that a cultured soul and civilised behaviour go hand in hand. With the characteristic unreasonableness of those who feel they have a cultural grudge he throws Arthur and Ford out of the airlock without regard for what they say of his excruciating verse. His inability to admit his cultural shortcomings is inextricably tied to his boorish behaviour.*
>
> *But what of Adams's handling of the episode? With subtle brilliance he has the two protagonists (inspired, of course, by Arthur, the Earthman) attempt to praise the Vogon's work, but unsurprisingly the best they can come up with while strapped down is a meaningless reworking of stale critical terms that counterpoint the bestialism of the underlying metaphor of the poet's inhumanity.*

Arnold is trying to impress upon his audience the "universal human values" which just happen to be currently held by the ruling class. In other words, Arnold wants the working class to define civilized behaviour as what the ruling class do, and influence their ideals and goals accordingly.

Arnold's insights are used solely for prescriptive purposes: he wants to use the fact that the effects of literature can be anything but obvious to change the world to suit him. He failed to start a trend, but his values continued to be promulgated by the critics who followed him. TS Eliot was one of the most influential critics in the first half of this century; his approach was slightly subtler:

> The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy *is fundamentally a novel of the little man struggling against oppression. Arthur Dent is tossed around by forces and events he cannot understand. His house is demolished, then his planet, and finally two policemen do their best to kill him, after numerous confusing adventures. Through these, Arthur is continually presented with the problem of what it means to be an earthman — in his case, the only earthman. Adams's book belongs securely in the tradition of Dostoevsky's* Crime and Punishment *in its shameful evocation of the crushing force of events, in the use of primal images of loss and transcendence.*

The word tradition is the key. Eliot viewed the central bastion of literary criticism as the Tradition, which was the canon of all those works regarded (by him, presumably) as Literature. The content of a work in terms of what it said was less important than the emotions in which it traded; a work in the Tradition fed on Man's most basic urges, and was aware that Literature was merely the artistic representation of an eternal dialogue between the fragments of a man's being. This meant that the only way that someone like, say, Solzhenitsyn could be admitted to the Tradition was to completely ignore the fact that he was in general exhorting people to change things, and deal instead with the quality of his prose, the material of his metaphor, the evocative and deeply meaningful nature of the torture scenes. Anyone who wanted to relate the work to real life just wasn't on Eliot's wavelength.

FR Leavis was another who picked up Arnold's baton and ran with it; in Leavis's case, the effects on literary theory were revolutionary and lasting. All modern theory

bears traces of his presence. He seemed, on the face of it, to have espoused a view which is quite at odds with the moral diffidence of Eliot. His demand for moral earnestness was famous. Reading literature made you a better person.

> *In any analysis of the interactions between Zaphod and Arthur, the passage on Magrathea where Zaphod leaves Arthur and Marvin to guard the entrance must be given a central place in the discussion. Adams wants us to project Zaphod as uncaring, and uninterested in Arthur. Zaphod refers to Arthur as "Er, hey Earthman" and "Good lad" to accentuate this and to depersonalize Arthur. The lack of harmony is further set off by the fact that Zaphod takes the attractive Trillian with him, while Arthur is left with the depressive Marvin. Arthur "stamps around in a huff" and "complains" after Zaphod leaves, and Marvin "eyes him balefully". He is thus presented as ineffectual, yet simultaneously he wins our sympathy. It is Arthur whom Adams wants us to care about.*

Leavis and his disciples believed that the world was a Rotten Place. Reading Literature (in the way he pioneered) made you aware of this, and made you want to *do* something about it! Such as read DH Lawrence. What this implied for those who didn't have the chance to read Austen, Eliot and Lawrence was that they were just unlucky. They were never going to have the chance to be as civilised as Leavis and his pals.

But there was another, more serious problem with Leavis's approach. He was constantly reiterating that literary criticism could concern itself only with the "words on the page", and that allowing anything else into one's discussion was breaking the rules. The result was that, as I tried to demonstrate above, where a writer showed a moral dilemma, Leavis was more interested in how he did it than with the morality itself. His focus was on the form of the morality, not its content, and was therefore just an updated, slightly more technical, subjectivity. CS Lewis summed up the major problem with Leavis when he said, "Leavis demands moral earnestness; I prefer morality.".

The message seems clear. All these early critics made Literature both the receptacle and the source of moral inspiration. Ideology is a sorely misused word, but one of its senses is applicable here — the sense in which it doesn't refer to politics directly at all, but instead means any system of beliefs and practices which constitute someone's unconscious viewpoint. With this definition in mind, it is immediately apparent that Leavis, Arnold, Eliot and their ilk never even tried to disentangle their ideological biases from their theories. Each of them saw the value judgments they made as being in some way "eternal" and not subject to discussion. In this way they hid the subjectivity of their discipline.

The implications of this line of argument are straightforwardly political. An ideological bias is almost certain to entail a political bias — this is just Matthew Arnold's basic premise restated in less complimentary form — and it starts to become hard to conceive a method of attack which would not be inherently political. Even common sense, the viewpoint that most would claim simply ignores all this theoretical agonizing, is as heavily biased as any — arguably more so, in fact.

However, the subjective approach of these early critics was only the first gust of the storm. Since then, a fantastic variety of methodologies have proclaimed themselves to the world as the Final Solution; with scraps of technique drawn from anthropology, sociology, psychology, philosophy and a hundred other disciplines. Of these, one of the earliest was Formalism (which flourished in the 1920s, thus largely predating Leavis) whose motto might have been "content is just the motivation for form".

By which they meant that the meaning of a literary work is a meaningless concept. The goal of literary criticism, for them, was no more than the analysis of form — and they decided that what made Literature was the technique of "making strange" that which is ordinary — committing a kind of violence on ordinary speech. This is subject to some hidden assumptions of a rather different nature to Leavis's and Eliot's. To use poetic language to describe an ordinary event is what defined Literature for the Formalists, but how do you define poetic language? Given that what we regard as colloquial English changes with both place and time, it would seem that "Literature" must change likewise. And if you take "literariness" to be just the relationship between two types of language usage, instead of an eternally defined Sacred Bookshelf, then you have on the one hand abandoned having an object on which to focus your academic attention, and on the other implied that literariness is simply a question of how a reader chooses to read a book. The Formalists, however, never quite took this step. Instead, they concerned themselves with analysis of the formal nature of the conventions that made literature — and especially poetry — work well. Their interests might have resulted in an analysis like this:

> *The grammatical structure underlying* The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy *can perhaps best be expressed by examining an individual sentence that is an exemplar for that structure: "His right-hand head looked around casually, said hi, and went back to having its teeth picked." The tripartite nature of this description is reflected in the narrative ordering of the entire book. First strangeness is presented in a realist guise, then acquaintance is made with the new element, and finally it proves impossible to lastingly alter the situation. In the same way, Arthur Dent encounters unusual things and gets to know about them, but is ultimately impotent. Adams uses this format again and again on the sentence and chapter level, and it is potent because of the inversion of language used — casual language used to describe events that are in fact anything but casual.*

Formalism, as I said, came close to some important insights, but the branches of theory that grew from their work did not bear their full fruit until well after the Second World War. Meanwhile, various other more or less unproductive theories all made their appearance and in some corners are argued for still — indeed there are many Leavisites still lurking in dark academic recesses all over the country. However, the current of literary thought that has unravelled the most meaning from the tangle of twentieth century criticism has flowed through structuralism and post-structuralism.

Structuralism, which is to an extent the starting place for many subsequent (and competing) theories, relies on an essential linguistic point, first made over seventy years ago by Saussure. He said that any language was no more than a system of signs, and that meaning was not inherent in any language or symbolic system. This is a more far-reaching claim than it might appear. It immediately implied for literary theory, for example, that studying words on paper is just the study of a system of signs, and that the meaning we assign to those signs is arbitrary. The structuralists interpreted this as meaning that there was an inherent structure in human thought and language, and that the meaning of a work could only be elucidated by reference to this structure as it was exemplified in the work.

So the structuralists restricted themselves to the study of the way the signs were put together, rather than any blathering about how well they meant what they meant. They looked for such things as binary oppositions (dark/light, male/female, old/young, rich/poor), inversions (low is raised to high, high is brought low) and so forth. They believed that you could not assign a meaning to an image in a work without first considering that image's

relationships to the other images. Thus meaning was purely a matter of relationships — structure, in other words. For example:

> *The essential signifying unit is the transition "many to one". Arthur Dent is initially one of many Earthmen, and is soon reduced to being the only one. He then makes acquaintances, but is abandoned on Earth in the distant past, left to his own devices even by Ford Prefect, and finally deserts the insufferable Golgafrinchams. Similarly, Ford Prefect is the only person to have survived the Great Collapsing Hrung Disaster on Betelgeuse Seven; thus, like Arthur, he is the remnant of another many to one operation.*

Structuralism has many advantages over most previous attempts to turn English from a dilettante's hobby into an academic discipline. It does turn away from the old ideas that such things as authorial intent were vital to the correct interpretation of a work, and it focusses attention on the structure of the writing in a very useful way. However, it abandons any consideration of the relationship that readers do in fact have with the books they read. It seems fairly clear that no matter what positive contribution to criticism structuralism has made, it fails to address centrally the question of why and how a work means what it means, and how a reader extracts that meaning. The structuralists may have argued that this was not the proper realm of literary theory; others did not agree.

What was needed was a theory of meaning itself; not in any linguistic sense, but a way of analysing the historical and cultural factors which mediated the perception of the meaning of a literary work (or indeed anything). This was provided in numerous related theoretical forms by the post-structuralists, who are currently at or near the Top of the Heap in the modern literary establishment.

For post-structuralism, the problem with the structuralist approach is that it is ahistorical — that is, that it doesn't recognize the influence of social and historical factors in the shaping of the meaning of a work. Structuralism takes no account of ideology, psychology, sociology, or any other theoretical way of accounting for the way a work is related to the environment in which it was created. Barthes, for example, in his book "S/Z" (an extended analysis of "Sarrasine", by Balzac) demonstrates that Balzac, a writer usually thought of as being very much a realist, is nothing of the sort. His dissection of "Sarrasine" shows it to be the product of artistic and social conventions. But he can only perform this kind of analysis by references outside the text — which are, to a purist structuralist, forbidden.

Furthermore, the post-structuralists put far less emphasis on the relationship between signs, and more on the fact that the meaning of any sign or set of signs can never be truly fixed. Writing is ambiguous, meaning is fluid, and the reader now seems adrift in a polysemic sea. Thus, for a theorist like Barthes, the movement to post-structuralism involved a change in focus, from "work" to "text". The former viewpoint saw a novel or poem as complete in itself, with no external references needed for interpretation; the latter acknowledged the irredeemably multiple nature of meaning, and hence the impossibility of finally pinning down the essence of the text.

There are several strands of modern thought built on the post-structuralist foundation. At least one is explicitly Marxist, although Marxist technique crops up all through the field. The Marxist view, demanding particular attention to history and ideology, is that realistic works such as "Sarrasine" are illusory, in that they attempt to conceal their conventional form, and to deceive the reader into believing that he is experiencing reality in a somehow less filtered way than when he reads an explicitly ideological work. (I am here using ideology in the broad sense, defined earlier). This in turn implies the work is authoritarian — it doesn't prompt you to question the way things are, it simply reinforces your beliefs, well below the level of your perception, while on the surface it talks about any number of other things — its explicit subject matter.

This is, perhaps surprisingly, very easily apparent in science fiction of all kinds and eras. The superficial differences in many invented cultures are just a disguise for the writer's unchallenged contemporary beliefs. Golden Age SF's handling of women is probably the best example of this, and in fact feminism has found post-structuralism a very productive vein to mine, because of its emphasis on the pervasiveness of ideology, and its transparency. Ideology surrounds us, like the air we breathe — it is notably an effort just to recognize that it is there.

The natural implication of this, which the post-structuralists picked up on, is that not only is literature riddled with ideology — inseparable from it, almost by definition — but literary criticism must be so too. Hence this article is itself post-structuralist, even Marxist, to the extent that it attempts to show that the theories discussed are inadequate for failing to deal with the history of literary criticism and for failing to take into account the way ideology and literature are inextricably intertwined. That's why I haven't included a post-structuralist critique of *The Hitch-hiker's Guide*; the rôle of literary theory is to analyse literary criticism, not literature itself. And so I believe that literary criticism must either acknowledge the ideology present in the work, and discuss it — as feminist critics do — or else it must ignore it, in the tradition of Arnold, Eliot, Leavis, and a thousand others. And in so doing it immediately silently proclaims itself to be just as ideological as the post-structuralism it spurns, for in refusing to acknowledge the presence of the system of beliefs in the work, it espouses them. Thus is a tradition forged.

This claim, in the name of common sense, that ideology simply doesn't exist, is most people's response to these ideas. They deny that ideology has any relevance to them or their lives, and they simply don't care about the questions raised. But this very denial of involvement is a political declaration, practically a manifesto. To those who don't question the assumptions inherent in what they read, and to those who feel that despite anything the academics say, it's all got nothing to do with them, there is only one thing to say:

Matthew Arnold would have been proud of you.

References

The major reference is Terry Eagleton's *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1983, £5.95), which covers most of the topics mentioned above, and in fact was the inspiration for this article. On p24 is a long quote from Matthew Arnold which should convince anyone who thinks I am imagining his wish to brainwash the working classes.

Two other books worth noting are Catherine Belsey, *Critical Practice* (Methuen, 1980, £3.95), which is a short discussion of literary theory advocating Marxist deconstructivism, and *Science Fiction: Its Criticism and Teaching* by Patrick Parrinder (Methuen, 1980, £3.95), which discusses the various critical approaches to science fiction that have been made and the faults and advantages of each of them. Parrinder's book suffers slightly from failing to provide a clear theoretical position from which to argue, but as a survey and introduction it is excellent.

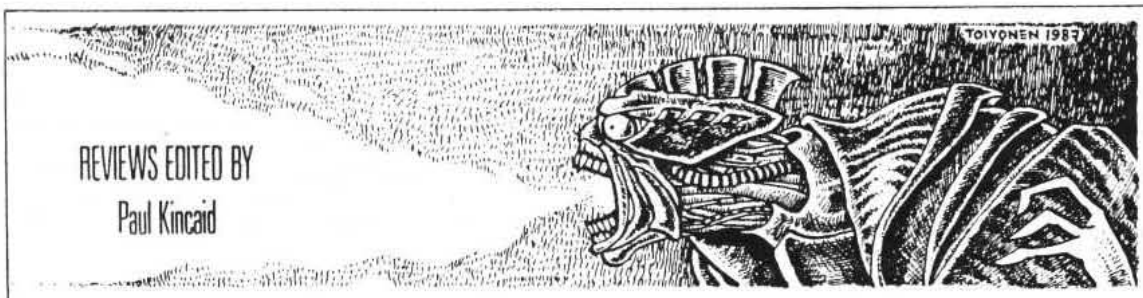
[An earlier version of this article appeared in *A Free Lunch 1*, edited by Mike Christie & Sherry Coldsmith.]

ROBERT A HEINLEIN — 1907 - 1988

CLIFFORD D SIMAK — 1904 - 1988

«They brought a great deal of pleasure to a great number of readers over many, many years»

Thankyou to both of you for being there when I first began to read science fiction. DVB



BOOKS

REVIEWS EDITED BY
Paul Kincaid

REVIEWS

THROUGH DARKEST AMERICA Neal Barrett Jr
(NEL, 1988, 275pp, £2.95)
Reviewed by Martyn Taylor

ISAAC ASIMOV PRESENTS "... NEW WRITERS who have radically novel styles and fashions that are being forged in the stress and heat of the 1980s". Where are those characteristics in this trip through "Red River" territory some centuries hence? In this post-Apocalyptic far West bluecoats have replaced the extinct Indians and human subspecies have superceded the Longhorn, but there remains a lot of men doing what a man's gotta do. Our hero, young Howie, falls in with the sublimely villainous Pardo once he has wreaked his inefficient (ie not fatal) revenge on the man who killed his pa. Pardo keeps Howie alive but eventually plays both ends against the middle too often and ends up flayed, while Howie's naked and alone in the desert, betrayed for not quite the last time.

Until that final moment the brisk, adequately described plot is mechanical. Plot imperative gets Howie into and out of his scrapes rather than internal logic. He survives while all around him die too often for verisimilitude, especially as he carries his brains in his erectile tissue not his head. That said, and allowing for being delivered by yet another impossible coincidence, the twist is neat, surprising and consistent. It made up for much of the distinctly ho-hum story preceding it.

Barrett's future did not entirely convince me, though. Humans as stock animals? Fine. A civil war? Certainly. Wholesale restoration of pioneer society and mores? Well ... okay. What I cannot accept is the "down home, jest plain folks" dialogue — language will change, just a smidgeon, over the centuries — and our future cowboys shooting off Colt 45s and Sharp's rifles. One of the few features of our society I confidently expect to survive Armageddon will be the capacity to manufacture if not Armalites at least Kalashnikovs (they are designed that way).

So, what do we have in this first novel? A curate's egg, a not entirely convincing, fast paced "by the numbers" action story which isn't too bad even if it isn't great. The scene setting is good, and so is some of the description — one account of a flooded battlefield is very much the real thing. I will not hunt out the sequel to *Through Darkest America* but there is more than enough here to make me want to keep an eye open for Neal Barrett's name in the future.

THE INFINITY CONCERTO - Greg Bear (342pp)
THE SERPENT MAGE - Greg Bear (343pp)
(Century, 1988, £11.95 hardback £5.95 paperback each)
Reviewed by Tom Jones

THIS IS ACTUALLY ONE STORY, AND WHILE you could read the first book, *The Infinity Concerto*, by itself, I doubt *The Serpent Mage* would make sense by itself.

The hero, Michael Perrin, is a 16 year old self-centred and somewhat directionless boy at the start; by the end he's mature, self-confident, caring and very important. Talk about character development!

The first book mainly takes place in the Realm, the world of the Sidhe. The Sidhe, the faery folk of Celtic myth, have been at war with humans, and other races, for aeons but have now retreated to the Realm. There are humans in the Realm mainly transported there by the magic of music, indeed music is central to the story. How many of the musical "facts" are true I don't know, but Greg Bear puts them over in a convincing way. There are also breeds, human/Sidhe crosses who play an important part in the story. The Realm is described as an incomplete world and it's possible to make it do what you want, this is the source of the magic.

At the time of the story the Isomage, Clarkham, aided by the humans, has tried to overthrow the Sidhe but failed. Now the humans are controlled and Clarkham has been banished but is still feared and a sort of treaty exists. Michael is sent to be trained by the Crane women in the ways of the Realm, then travels across the Realm to find Clarkham. Throughout he is manipulated and used, a pawn, but there are layers on layers and his final purpose is unlikely to be the obvious one.

In the second book the Realm is collapsing and the Sidhe are forced to migrate to Earth, which is affected not only by this migration but by the magical side effects of the Realm's collapse. Various mages are struggling for power and Michael strives to bring peace and a resolution to the problems.

It is in this book that Bear seems to get somewhat carried away with the alternative views of the universe, evolution, history and almost everything else you can think of. As usual with this sort of book myths, particularly the Garden of Eden, are shown to be distortions of the truth and even Jesus being tempted by the devil is brought in. While some of this is necessary to the story much of it isn't, the author seems to be trying to see how much he can fit in.

Only Michael has any real character or depth, indeed he's the only person "on stage" for any significant period of time. And I felt that the second book lacked any real tension, Michael was never in any real danger. So I shouldn't like the books, but I did. Bear writes good, straightforward prose. It may be a bit sparse for some books but I think it suits this fantasy tale. And the story moves along, he is a good story-teller and manages to suspend not only my disbelief but also my critical faculty.

THE DIGGING LEVIATHAN - James P. Blaylock
(Morrigan, 1988, 275pp, £11.95, Special Edition £35.00)
Reviewed by Mike Moir

PHILIP K. DICK IS DEAD, BUT HIS FRIENDS live on. It is a curious postscript to the great man's life that, after his untimely death, three of his closest friends should finally gain acclaim as SF authors. It could be explained if they were imitators, or the glory was reflected and undeserved, but each in his own style has rightly earned careful attention. We have been exposed to the many talents of K.W. Jeter and Tim Powers, now finally we have James P. Blaylock.

Quite honestly I don't know what to make of this book, the plot is indescribable and not particularly relevant to the enjoyment of the novel. If you can imagine Burroughs' Pellucidar out of Orange County California, with mermen and endless bizarre inventions, then you have some idea of the flavour. Such a choice of subjects does not exactly rivet me to my seat, but

B O O K S

having persevered I found I was enjoying it. I was left with no doubt of Blaylock's skill as a writer. I just never quite got enthralled with the subject matter.

Blaylock has written a novel of pure whimsy. It is not the SF of one implausible thing extrapolated, but one impossibility every page, a Heath Robinson paradise with abundant peculiar characters to match. I found little logic, but soon realised it was the wrong thing to be looking for. Unfortunately, where there is no logic the plot becomes tenuous and an author's greatest skills are needed. I consider Blaylock set himself a very hard task and failed, but without really harming his reputation.

Although Blaylock is quite a different author from Powers and Jeter, there's no doubt as to cross influences. Here again we meet William Ashbless, 19th century poet and hero of Powers' *The Anubis Gates*. Also there is the group's fixation on sewer systems, almost all the works of Powers and Jeter contain action in vast and fantastic sewer systems, and they are here again. Obviously Blaylock finds them just as fascinating.

Since the rise and fall of cyberpunk there has been an alternative movement which the pundits have christened steampunk. The premise is that where cyberpunk was the combination of high computer technology and urban decay (or urban sleeze), steampunk is the combination of anachronistic technology and urban decay. Where cyberpunk should be set firmly in the future, steampunk should be set in the past (preferably Victorian London). Now only history will tell, but I believe *The Digging Leviathan* is at least one of the (innocent) originators of this. I am never sure if such a dubious historical pedigree is important, but it is worthy of note.

You may well find Blaylock's whimsical style to your tastes and consider the book a masterpiece. If he is not to your taste then it is still an interesting oddity.

THE MOVEMENT OF MOUNTAINS - Michael Blumlein
[Simon & Schuster, 1988, 289pp, £11.95]
Reviewed by Jim England

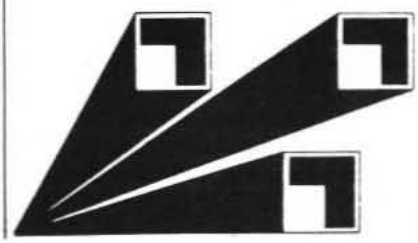
THE ONLY INFORMATION WE ARE GIVEN IN the blurb about the writer is that he is a doctor living in San Francisco and his stories have appeared in *Omni*, *Interzone* and *Twilight Zone*. According to the blurb this is his "eagerly awaited" first novel. I found it disconnected and discombobulating.

It is supposed to be "near-future San Francisco", but on page 12 he refers to "ancient tenements" amongst the "tall buildings of every imaginable shape" (sic), and the future does not seem near at all. The place is filled with a constant humming noise. The poor are chased by mutated dogs. The hero-narrator is a fat doctor with inordinate appetites for both food and sex. He sees in his patients the first signs of an Aids-type viral disease. Leaving this milieu with many questions unanswered, he is whisked off to the colonised planet of Eridis with no description of either the planet or the journey. To add insult, we are expected to believe that radio communication across the presumed light-years takes only a few days. On Eridis he ministers to "a race of genetically engineered slaves", Domers, engaged in mining a supposed new wonderdrug found in a fungus growing (would you believe?) on slate-like rock of a kind unknown on Earth. (But it could be synthesised surely, or the drug obtained through biological engineering, like the Domers?) This is all really too silly for words.

After leading a sort of revolution in the mines (yawn, as some unkind reviewers say), the doctor returns to earth where he attempts to spread the Aids-type disease through ceaseless copulation, believing that it will, in some undisclosed way, "liberate" mankind. End of story.

So there is sex and violence: a formula one might think would grab lots of readers, but I don't think it will. It manages only to be dreary and distasteful. (The most memorable scene is one in which the hero performs an autopsy on his girlfriend before her corpse is cold: trying not to look at her face.) I gained an overall impression that if the plot requires a certain thing to happen, Blumlein will make it happen without regard for plausibility. His characters are jerked around like puppets.

Being a doctor, the author is able to scatter medical terminology throughout the text. Besides this, he writes in a very artificial-sounding style. He invariably says something is "commenced" rather than begun. Words like "fare", "edibles" and "a repast" are used for food. The other day on the radio an editor said that novels sent for "your perusal" are hardly ever worth reading, and I thought it just the sort of thing that Blumlein would write. But I would not say that the novel is not worth reading — at least by "literary" types who don't know much about the speed of light (or care). It just depresses me to see it hyped so much and to read that, according to John Clute, it is "one of the best books of the year".



THE FIREBRAND - Marion Zimmer Bradley
[Michael Joseph, 1988, 560pp, £11.95]
Reviewed by Helen McNabb

THIS IS THE STORY OF THE TROJAN WAR told from the other side. Instead of the male, bellicose, Akhaian viewpoint of *The Iliad*, Bradley has taken a female, peaceable, Trojan perspective. Even if your memories of this familiar story are as vague as mine, there are always incidents and aspects of the story which are known next to elements which are not, so that I confess to great uncertainty as to how much is interpreted fact and how much is fiction. Whether or not this matters in a novel about a period for which historical fact is sparse is a matter of personal preference. I surmise that Bradley has done her homework then, as a novelist not a historian, has felt free to give her imagination room for development. Probably very similar to the way Homer told the same story.

It is an era of great change of which the war is only one part. Conflict is apparent between the fertility goddess Earth Mother worship where a matriarchy is the norm (and in extreme cases a year king is sacrificed) and the Greek pantheon ruled by Zeus, an aggressively dominant male god. The iron-using men from the North have overcome the Queens, subjugating and marrying them to claim hereditary kingship, altering the old order irrevocably. A fact which the women can see but which many ignore through love for the men themselves and the lack of military ability to change it.

The story is that of Kassandra from her childhood in wealthy Troy, through the long war and beyond. Her prophesies are visions sent by the gods, including Apollo whose call she obeys by becoming his priestess. He is real, as are all the supernaturals, their actions affect mankind. Kassandra is able to understand that the gods use humanity as mere tools in their own war, and that individuals are of little account to them.

Much of this book is good. It is readable. The conflict between the male and female dominated religions is well portrayed, the heroes of the Trojan War are human, not semi-divine, there is a lot of debunking of myth by rational explanation which I liked. My major disappointment is the character of Kassandra who never came fully to life, which surprises me as characters in other books by Bradley are brimming with vitality. The anguish and grief are too far away, the feminist viewpoint is interesting and stimulating, but the book would be better if it aroused laughter and tears rather than just interest. The final problem for any fiction dealing with the classical period is comparison with Mary Renault. There is none of the strangeness that Renault evokes so effortlessly, instead we have an ordinary woman who sees gods, has visions, but gives us no sense that her life is alien to

B O O K S

that we live ourselves. Perhaps Bradley had no intention of making Kassandra alien, there is a good argument for making her like someone you meet in the supermarket, but I think she missed an opportunity by doing so.

WRITERS OF THE FUTURE III - Algis Budrys (Ed)
[Bridge, 1987, 429pp, £3.50]
Reviewed by Valerie Housden

TWELVE WINNERS AND TWO FINALISTS IN the WOTF competition, plus words of wisdom from Frederik Pohl, Gregory Benford and Jerry Pournelle, together with details of the contest make up this medium thick volume. The experts give advice on how to present a manuscript for publication, how to impart necessary detail to the reader without resorting to long paragraphs of technical explanation, and making the future plausible — all very useful to the would-be writer.

The stories vary from a Mormon sermon, through post-holocaust civilisations, alternative histories, horror, cyborgs, space adventure and serendipitous whimsy to a treasure. Most revisit familiar ideas but from interesting angles. "The Language of the Sea" by Carolyn Ives Gilman set in a self-sufficient society on board ship, examines the nature of telepathy as a form of mutual understanding rather than for passing specific messages. "A Little of What You Fancy" by Mary Catherine McDaniel might well put you off accepting produce from a friend's allotment, while "Old Mickey Flip Had A Marvellous Ship" by Lori Ann White takes the sentient spaceship idea to its logical conclusion, debating how to treat such a vehicle when it has a nervous breakdown.

Stories which did not work so well for me included "Jacob's Ladder" by Shayne Bell, not because of the obvious debt owed to Arthur C. Clarke's *Fountains of Paradise*, but because it was tedious and I don't like being preached at. Writing in the third person would have helped to maintain the necessary tension. The token British contribution, "A Day in the Life" by Christopher Ewart, a buddy-buddy story of two policemen destroying intelligent robots, was spoilt by being too juvenile.

Each story is preceded by a page of hyperbole. But the comments about "Resonance Ritual" by Paula May are just right. A folksy story barely one thousand words long which made me cry, this is the sort of tale the poet Robert Frost might have produced had he written SF prose. Strangely it did not win a prize.

None of my favourites won prizes and one of my dislikes did. So what makes a prizewinner? Some stories proved eminently forgettable, some tedious. I probably liked about half of them; a good average for any short story anthology.

KING OF THE MURGOS - David Eddings
[Bantam, 1988, 416pp, £11.95]
Reviewed by Terry Broome

IN *GUARDIANS OF THE WEST*, GARION'S NEW enemy, Zandramas, another Lord of Dark, kidnapped his son. In this volume his company is sidetracked from its pursuit into visiting the King of the Murgos.

Eddings is self-conscious about the repetitiveness of his work, as is clear when Garion asks Belgareth, "Why is it that all of this seems to have happened before?" and later says, "It seems almost as if we were repeating everything that happened when we were trying to find the Orb."

The characters don't develop, nor do they get any closer to Zandramas. Instead, they are led around in circles, drawn by authorial carrots, encountering dragons, demons and ghouls. They are hypocritical, cruel, petulant, childish murderers, indistinguishable from the baddies. Ce'nedra, in particular, does nothing but weep and look glum. They spend their time cooking or incessantly discussing the weather. When *important* issues are brought up, they are mentioned in a dull, mechanical way without depth. The odds are stacked in their favour — when they get into the smallest difficulty, Eddings calls on God, some other magical intrusion, or book of prophecy.

This volume doesn't contain as many italics as the first, but otherwise, my criticism of that book (V140), and Mary Gentle's (PI69), is still applicable here. One reason the books may be badly written is the pressure the author's under from publishers to deliver a serial product in such a short time. Timing sequels or further volumes is often crucial if the book is to be a success. It is a shame that writers are frequently persuaded to write quickly and messily for financial rewards they would not otherwise receive. One danger of writing a serial where the first parts are published before the later parts are written is that they may increasingly bend to commercial pressures. *King of the Murgos* ends on an oddly old-fashioned movie-serial cliffhanger. Except for about fifty pages, the entire book is superfluous padding, the characters and the action are dull. The humour doesn't work. Nothing works well, because Eddings doesn't seem to care about his characters or the world they inhabit.

The worst one can say about any book is that it is boring. *King of the Murgos* is boring.

OKTOBER - Stephen Gallagher
[NEL, 1988, 256pp, £10.95]
Reviewed by Paul Brazier

THIS NOVEL SITS UNCOMFORTABLY ON THE border of the nightmare country so many of its characters come to inhabit. This is not an inherent fault in the writing so much as a mistake in pitching. It tries for mainstream characterisation, SF and horror, and as a consequence falls between stools. It is a mark of how well it is constructed that it does not merely collapse.

I have never read any of Steve Gallagher's books before, but I have had good reports — and this book certainly bears them out. The vision is cinematic so that it would transfer well to the screen as an SF/horror thriller set in the near future. It is set among yuppies in a Swiss ski resort, native soldier casualties in a Vietnamese village, and out-of-work enterprisers in an off-season English seaside town. And it concerns the unscrupulous doings of an international pharmaceutical conglomerate. All good trendy stuff, but the net seemed to me to be cast too wide, when you have already taken on three genres at once.

Which is my only real criticism. The writing style is competent and easy on the eye, and the plotting is actually superb. The problems came from the fact that in this everyday story of international intrigue, every once in a while Gallagher sticks in a horror symbol to remind us that this is a horror story. I found this infuriating because it seemed to be the only use of symbolism, and such uses tended to be unconnected to anything going on around them. Which I suppose is the problem with trying to juggle so many balls at once — your audience can be forgiven for forgetting that some of them are there at all.

Essentially, if you have read any of Gallagher's books and enjoyed them, I suspect you won't be disappointed with this one. But I don't think it's going to make him any new fans.

GHOST KING - David Gemmell
[Century, 1988, 266pp, £11.95 hardback, £6.95 paperback]
Reviewed by Terry Broome

THE KING HAS BEEN ASSASSINATED AND Prince Thuro escapes with the help of Culain lach Feragh and his ward, Laitha. The boy, Thuro, becomes the man, Uther Pendragon, Laitha is obviously Guinevere and Culain and other

B O O K S

major characters turn out to be immortals from Atlantis who have been known throughout history as various important, aggressive historical and mythical figures. The stage is set for lots of violence, a pinch of sexual titillation and Thuro/Uther's triumphant taking of the throne.

Ghost King is a confused, but involved Arthurian mish-mash with strong echoes of *Wolf in Shadow* (to which it is loosely linked), Moorcock's Multiverse and the conspiracy of history theories of *Illuminatus!* Much better written than his *Wolf in Shadow*, it is still a poor reworking of the Arthurian legends, and lacks the skill Moorcock displays in the more routine of his Eternal Champion novels.

No doubt fans of Arthurian/Atlantis soups will be greatly impressed by the many gratuitous historical references, which I found to be an irritatingly cheap and unnecessarily commercial device. Real characterisation and dialogue however are in some evidence amidst this fog of trivia.

Gemmell stresses in a foreword that *Ghost King* is not meant to be historically accurate. After reading the book this appeared to be an excuse for his arbitrary interpretation of the Arthurian myths (saving him the trouble of coming up with an original, self-supporting idea?), or laziness in researching his subject. The only reason I see for this somewhat tacky use of the Arthurian myths is commercial — a poor return for the price.

The word "simple" is used a great deal at the start of the book and well sums it up. If you don't mind your mythology sullied, however, you may gain momentary satisfaction from reading it.

REPLAY - Ken Grimwood
[Grafton, 1987, 272pp, £9.95]
Reviewed by Valerie Housden

AT 1.06 PM ON OCTOBER 18, 1988, JOURnalist Jeff Winston dies, and wakes to find that it is May 1963, he is 18 years old and in his first year at college in Atlanta. With his knowledge of the future he makes a fortune, first by betting, then by playing the stock market. His attempt to meddle with history, by having Lee Harvey Oswald arrested before JFK's visit to Dallas, backfires. Kennedy is still assassinated. Details of his own life are altered, he marries a different woman, fathers a child, while history remains relatively unaltered: Vietnam, Watergate, the Tehran hostages. Until he dies on 18 October 1988 at 1.06 pm and wakes up to find that it is May 1963 and he is eighteen years old ....

The problem with setting the pivot of a story two years into the future is that the narrative will omit intervening true incidents which could be significant. There is no mention of Irangate, Ollie North or Black Monday; the last a serious omission in a story where the protagonists repeatedly finance themselves by investing on Wall Street. And given the date on which the replayers die, Grimwood could easily have invested 19 October, 1987 with added significance.

A journalist who grew up in the sixties, Grimwood uses current affairs and music to particular effect to evoke the spirit of the times. We are reminded in no uncertain terms that America in 1963 had never heard of the Beatles. Phil Spector was the *Wunderkind* of the moment. There were no Japanese cars on the road, and you needed a can-opener, or "church-key", to get into a can of Coke!

He is less successful in describing the clothes worn in the early sixties. Is it really too much to expect a male writer to give a clear evocation of period using what people wore? It is not good enough simply to write statements such as:

> The youthful fashions of the eighties, aside from the postapocalyptic punk look, were virtually indistinguishable from those of his own early college days.

What are people wearing in 1988 that look like the fashions of the early sixties? What does a Madras skirt look like? I thought men paid more attention to hemlines than women! I found myself having to use memory much more than imagination.

However the psychological implications of instanteously switching from being a middle-aged failure to a callow youth are vividly portrayed, and his characters generally are well drawn and sustained. The introduction of further replayers helps speed the plot along, and attempts to find an explanation for the phenomenon lead, in one replay, to disastrous changes in history. The suggestion that aliens are using us for cathartic entertainment, and keep pressing the rewind button, is easily dismissed as the ravings of a psychotic.

An entertaining exercise in nostalgia even for us non-Americans, this book will quickly date. It will not win any prizes, but it will help a tedious train journey pass quickly.

DARKSPELL - Katharine Kerr
[Grafton, 1988, 369pp, £10.95 hardback £6.95 paperback]
Reviewed by Sue Thomason

THIS NOVEL IS THE SECOND VOLUME OF A projected fantasy trilogy (the first is *Daggerspell*). The setting is an alternate-history or parallel-world earth, as the inhabitants of the Kingdom of Deverry speak a P-Celtic language, maintain a Pict/Celt derived culture, and know the works of some classical authors (Aristotle, Cicero) as survivals from a remote past. However many of the standard fantasy premises also underpin the book: Elves and Dwarves exist as humanoid (not necessarily magical) races; magic (dweomer) exists and can be used (within consistent limits) by the talented and trained to further the work of either the Light or the Dark.

The main theme of the trilogy is thus (obviously) Light against Dark, worked out through the unfolding interlinked destinies of a small group of people as they pass through a number of incarnations. The Wyrd (fate) of Brangwen and her rival lovers Blaen and Gerraent has been altered by the dweomer-master (wizard) Nevyn. Though his initial intervention was well meant, it produced unforeseen complications as his friends' destinies became as intricately entangled as a piece of Celtic knotwork, and Nevyn is oath-bound to remain alive until the pattern is unbound. The trilogy covers four manifestations of the pattern/incarnations of the protagonists, in a welter of shifting emotional ties, power-politics, and changing historical and cultural conditions.

The plot situations and characters evoke strong resonances of a number of Celtic myths (Gwenhwyfar/Arthur/Lancelot/Merlin, Blodeuwedd/Lleu/Gronw/Gwydion, and so on) without being direct copies of them. The story is on the whole very competently written, though it suffers from an initial attack of Explication (the "Well, Councilmen, now that you're all here, I'll just run over the political situation in the divided kingdoms of Deverry and Eldidd for the last 150 years ..." problem) and Vocabulary (it doesn't help to be told on page 5 that:

> Rhodry's mother is Lovyan, and she rules the tiernrhyn of Dun Gwerbyn in her own right through the Clw Coc clan. His father was Tingyr, a Maelwaedd of Aberwyn, and now Rodry's eldest brother, Rhys, is gwerbret of Aberwyn.

This might well be less indigestible and more meaningful for someone who'd read the first volume, though).

I enjoyed the novel, it held my attention, and I'd like to read the other volumes. But at £6.95 per (hardback-shape, paper cover) volume I don't think I'll be buying them ...

THE TOMMYKNOCKERS - Stephen King
[Hodder, 1988, 563pp, £12.95]
Reviewed by John Newsinger

KING IS SO PROLIFIC A WRITER OF BESTselling horror fiction that he can be safely accounted a social phenomenon. There are sound sociological reasons for investigating his books leaving aside reading them for pleasure.

The Tommyknockers is written very much within the conventions of science fiction. It features an alien

B O O K S

spacecraft that has lain buried beneath the earth for millions of years, and is accidentally stumbled over by Bobbi Anderson, a writer of pulp westerns. The craft, as it is uncovered, begins, slowly and painfully, to transform Bobbi and the inhabitants of the small town of Haven into creatures no longer human, Tommyknockers.

The story is written very much from the point of view of Bobbi's ex-lover, Jim Gardener, an unlovable alcoholic poet. Only gradually does the full horror of what is taking place in Haven penetrate his drunken stupor. He is driven by despair at the way the world is going into seeking refuge in a bottle. Yet when the chips are down he finds that he has untapped reserves of stamina and courage ... as well as the most amazing luck!

The storyline is hardly new: *Invasion of the Bodysnatchers* yet again, except in this instance they come in the guise of tooth fairies! But in fact the book is tremendously exciting and provides numerous thrills in the course of its 500+ pages.

King's great strengths as a writer of popular fiction are best demonstrated in his treatment of Haven and its inhabitants, of the nature of smalltown America which seems to make it particularly vulnerable to takeover by creeping evil. It is as if Newt Berringer, Dick Allison and the rest were only waiting for their transformation to happen, for their lives to be fulfilled in this way, for their capacity for evil to be tapped. They "become" creatures of immense technological ingenuity and expertise, but regress in terms of temperament and emotional control, surely a metaphor for contemporary America.

Less successful is King's working out of the character of Jim Gardener. He provides the opportunity for a sustained authorial diatribe against nuclear energy, but never really becomes convincing in his own right. The man is portrayed as so drowned in drunken self-pity, such a physical and emotional wreck, that his final emergence as saviour of the world, as a veritable superhero, lacks credibility. As far as Gardener is concerned King substitutes narrative pace for characterisation with the result that the book creaks as bit as it approaches its climax. However while what King does as a writer might well be limited, he nevertheless does it magnificently. Like the rest of his output, *The Tommyknockers* would not put this reader down.

IN THE CHINKS OF THE WORLD MACHINE - Sarah Lefanu
[Women's Press, 1988, 231pp, £5.95]
Reviewed by K.V. Bailey & Mandy Gunning

THE AUTHOR IN HER INTRODUCTION DISclaims having offered a definitive guide to or a definitive interpretation of either "women's" or "feminist" science fiction. In its interpretations the book certainly bears the stamp of an individual viewpoint, but it is also balanced, perceptive and creates literary and critical vistas which enhance appreciation of the genres and subgenres with which it deals. Her "philosophical" stance is: "we exist in relation to, and not separate from, that which is different from us." (p123)

As for its status as a guide, Ms Lefanu is too modest. True, as she says, she is personally selective in allocating space and attention, but she puts into context most everything of significance in this field. Moreover, the source notes, the index of works by author, and the carefully compiled bibliography, used cross-referentially and with the text, provide a near-encyclopedic conspectus.

I have used the words "genres and sub-genres", which she does not; and perhaps I am wrong to do so. Her approach is neither narrow nor compartmentalising; rather it is holistic, integrating a variety of historical, political, psychological and sociological insights and contentions. Of her two main themes one is implicit in the title, taken from a Tiptree story, the "world machine" denoting male-oriented society which in many of the works considered manifests itself in power-centred, repressive and aggressive politico-cultural structures. Her examination of various fictional "chinks", however, identifies them as openings into alternate, alternative and to some extent presently realisable worlds. This relates to her other main theme which is that, because of its nature, SF fictively destabilises or transmutes existing order, and because the "alien" and alienation are everywhere to be found in SF, it is in distinctive ways the woman writer's and the feminist writer's field.

Part I comprises a series of essays positing such questions as: "Amazons: Feminist Heroines or Men in Disguise?" and "Is There a Women's Science Fiction?". Part II consists of four substantial studies: James Tiptree Jr, Ursula K. LeGuin, Suzy McKee Charnas and Joanna Russ. In these an admirable talent for précis and for apt quotation bring to life and/or recollection the works considered, making easily assimilable the relationships established between elements in an author's work, and the comparisons made of author with author. This talent is not confined to Part II. In the earlier section her extended analysis of Pamela Zoline's "The Heat Death of the Universe", and her adroit counterpointing of McIntyre with LeGuin, are two of the best SF critiques I have recently come across. I know it's a cliché, but this is a book for every shelf. [KVB]

HERE IS A WORK WHICH ADMIRABLY ACHIEves its author's stated objective: to show the ingenuity and vitality with which feminists have worked in the SF genre. Lefanu discusses the work of Russ, Charnas, LeGuin, Tiptree and many others with infectious enthusiasm. The

thoroughness of her survey and zeal are the strongest points in favour of her discussion of SF and feminism.

The weakest aspect of the book is her treatment of "feminism", as if it were a single banner under which these writers, with their different political priorities, have united. And of course where there are followers, there are defectors. Lefanu does not accept that any writer with a political objective has to reach people where they are — not where she'd like them to be. LeGuin reached a certain kind of reader, the kind who'd give up on *The Female Man*, and opened up her mind to feminist possibilities. Russ engrossed readers like myself — readers who are more familiar with feminism than with SF. Despite her stated intention, Lefanu too often outlines the criteria for a canon of feminist SF writing.

Lefanu alludes approvingly to the theories which state how and why post-modern literary techniques are effective for feminism but the approval is again evaluative. Her literary theoretical arguments are seldom used for their explanatory power and therefore appear more convenient than cogent. She has a perfect right to prefer writers who use anti-realist techniques over those who do not, but her implied assertion that anti-realist texts are more feminist than others needs further exploration. She praises, rightly, Zoline's "The Heat Death of the Universe" for its feminism and modernity, but does not explain why a realist narrative based on the same story would be any less feminist.

In the gap between Lefanu's theoretical language and her own feminist project — a project I whole-heartedly endorse — various contradictions emerge. For example, Russ's Alyx stories escape an anti-realist assessment but LeGuin's SF work, no more realist than the Alyx stories, is not so lucky. Lefanu levels the charge of essentialism — the theory that proposes, with often negative consequences for women, a human essence — at some writers but drops the charge when discussing the feminist utopias and dystopias of Gearhart and Charnas. Yet these writers' novels are particularly vulnerable to an anti-essentialist critique. It is curious, too, that LeGuin's own defection from realist narrative techniques in *Always Coming Home* is not mentioned.

Despite these misgivings, anyone serious about SF and its potential

B O O K S

should read this book. Lefanu refreshed my interest in the genre and points the way to further discussions about SF and feminism. A useful book, showing as any good survey should do, the work still to be done. [MG]

HALF A GLASS OF MOONSHINE - Graham Dunstan Martin
[Unwin, 1988, 179pp, £11.95]
Reviewed by Ken Lake

MEMO TO PUBLISHERS: IF YOU WANT TO sell any copies of this book outside the Psychic Bookshop, sack your dust-wrapper artist.

Memo to author: peopling a book with characters whom nobody can find sympathetic or pleasant is a dangerous decision. Your heroine is an empty-headed self-manipulator, keen to suppress any thought or reaction for her own peace of mind. Her husband is missing, and from what one learns of him this is a blessing, yet she spends the entire book trying to track him down, figure out how he can have transferred money from his bank account after he died in a terrorist aircraft explosion, and meet women with whom he was having affairs. His parents are completely self-satisfied and — like most of the characters — heedlessly unkind and thoughtless ... and so it goes. It's not till Alan comes on the scene, helps the heroine and seduces her, then squires her around in search of the strangely undead husband, that one meets a pleasant person. Meanwhile the heroine, a psychic researcher and lecturer in a slightly-off-normal Oxford, has trouble with a scheming boss and a parody colleague of ineffable stupidity, not to mention visions, sightings, missing houses, dreams and the literal experience of having your body behave like an out-of-control computer.

Memo to reader: this is not written like an SF novel, as were *Time-Slip* and *The Dream Wall*; it's more like an existentialist *roman à clef*. You should not feel deceived by this, for the author has also written two children's books and an adult fantasy novel. But assuming the paperback publishers manage to locate someone with the faintest idea of SF conventions in cover design you may well find yourself with this book in your hands and wonder just what you have uncovered.

Stick with it. The characters may be unpleasant, the discussion didactic and apparently lacking in coherence or connection with the plot, but this is because Martin has neatly woven his philosophy into a light, slight skein that hardly touches the rest of the book until you reach the last 50 pages and things start to fall together. In any case, many of the arguments are inherently interesting, adding a bit of intellectual challenge to what would otherwise have been rather a run-of-the-mill psychic mystery, or perhaps even the word "psychic" is putting it too strongly.

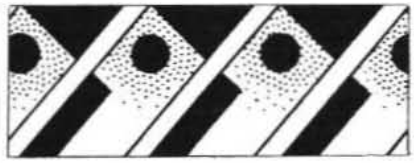
It is, perhaps, a pity that, in the blurb, the author goes on record as believing Jung's contention that "our nightmares must be made conscious, lest they happen in the real world, as fate," for it adds a needless mystic tinge to the whole thing.

THE DRABBLE PROJECT - Ed. Rob Meades & David B. Wake
[Beccon, 1988, 110pp, £5.00]
Reviewed by Jon Wallace

A DRABBLE IS A SHORT-SHORT STORY, EXactly 100 words long. This book is a super Drabble, being a collection of 100 Drabbles (a HectoDrabble?). The collection began as Birmingham's answer to Trivial Pursuit and just sort of growed.

The short-short story is ideal for putting across a single, punchy idea. This collection is full of punchy ideas.

There are shaggy God stories, Adam and Eve stories, nuclear holocaust and non-nuclear holocaust, social comment and general comment, puns and poems, experimental, temperamental and fundamental all wrapped together in this package. Some are good, most worth a look, essential reading for fans.



NEXT, AFTER LUCIFER - Daniel Rhodes
[New English Library, 1988, 258pp, £10.95]
Reviewed by Nik Morton

ANOTHER FIRST NOVEL, AND TO BE WELcomed for that. As a horror story it is more fantasy than SF ... but this is no blood-and-gore horror story, it is of that style where the terror gradually builds up, inevitable, dreadful - keeping the reader page-turning.

American academic McTell has brought his new wife Linden to a villa above the French town of Saint-Bertrand. Here, he hopes to complete his latest academic work. Unfortunately, he is side-tracked by the medieval attractions of the ruined Templar castle of Montsévrain, a place seemingly shrouded in centuries' old dark deeds committed by a depraved Knight Templar, Guilhem de Courdeval.

The dark events are precipitated by McTell, unknowingly (perhaps) when he contracts some locals to fill the villa's swimming-pool, even though there is a drought - for they divert an underground spring to the pool ... and release Courdeval's evil spirit. From that point on, people experience disturbing waking and sleeping dreams, the spring's discoverers die unnaturally, and McTell uncovers a grimoire and begins his transformation.

Standard fare really, and a little anti-climactic in that the ending suggests the possibility of a sequel in the fashion of *The Omen*. It is a fairly quick and interesting read, the characters with their all too human foibles coming alive, the French countryside well researched. But Rhodes stacks the cards against his main characters: McTell married but didn't love his wife; Linden's relations and friends, who visit with disastrous results, are anything but sympathetic characters. Indeed, the relatively minor characters, the French people of the village, are more successful at claiming the reader's sympathy, even if one coincidentally happens to be of a psychic bent: "It was the sense that something had been *let out* which should not have been."

The clumsy title derives from: "The demon Belial, it said, had been created next, after Lucifer."

Verdict: for a first novel it has many accomplishments, not least the delineation of characters and the setting of the various scenes. The end confrontation was a little confusing and contrived, with the anticlimax presaging a sequel offering disappointment. Worth a look.

THE NATURAL HISTORY OF THE P.H. - Keith Roberts
[Kerosina, 1988, 16pp]
Reviewed by Paul Kincaid

IT TAKES ONLY THE MOST CURSORY EXAMination of the work of Keith Roberts to recognise the rôle that women play. Young women, often dark, always sexy have cropped up with remarkable regularity in his fiction, from Pete in *The Furies* to the multi-girl of *The Chalk Giants* to the eponymous *Molly Zero* to Kaeti, Gráinne and countless others. They play an almost mythic part in his stories, representative not only of the strong sexual undercurrent that is in all his work, but also of the sense of the individual, the spirit of liberation, found there also. They are beings to be desired if not always to be pursued precisely because of this archetypal aspect. Yet Roberts writes about women with a perception and a sympathy unusual in male authors; there is a very strong reality underneath the symbol.

It is that, both the real and the symbolic, that is the subject of this brief monograph. The Primitive Heroine, as he chooses to represent her, is described as he is constantly encountering her in life. "Movement is her concern; movement, and speed. Yesterday has ceased to exist; and in the main she takes little thought for the morrow." And as she is represented in

B O O K S

the art of the Pre-Raphaelites, Mucha, the *Carmina Burana*, and Robert Holdstock's *Mythago Wood*. It is out of a conversation between Roberts and Holdstock that this article was spun, and if it adds little to our appreciation of Holdstock's work, it does provide a valuable pointer to any critical understanding of Roberts' own writing. "The true PH is female, not feminine; between the two words is a gulf that is unbridgeable." Read that and go to encounter once more Molly and Kaeti, the Lady Eleanor and Richenda.

THE WOODEN SPACESHIPS – Bob Shaw
[Gollancz, 1988, 294pp, £10.95]
Reviewed by Mike Moir

THE SECOND VOLUME OF A TRILOGY MUST be a nightmare for any author. It can have, almost by definition, neither a true beginning nor a true ending. After his excellent *The Ragged Astronauts* it was interesting to see how Bob Shaw would cope with this problem.

I badly wanted to enjoy this novel; which is always rather unfair on the book, how can it possibly come up to expectations? I had forgotten what a skilled craftsman Bob Shaw is: he would never undertake such an endeavour without knowing how he was going to overcome the problems.

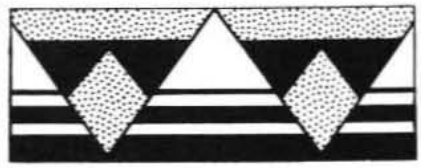
The Wooden Spaceships has a pretty strong beginning and as powerful an ending as is possible without making volume three impossible. The key is the central character Toller; strongly drawn in volume one, he is painted in fine detail here. Shaw is a past master at strong central characters, but Toller is his best so far. He adapts well to some circumstances, but steadfastly refuses to budge to others. He's quite real, but a product of their, not our, society.

Let's get things in perspective: this is space opera and, as the title implies, anachronistic space opera at that. In volume one we saw interplanetary travel by balloon, here the same level of technology manages interplanetary war and attempts much more. In a way Shaw has designed his own ideal environment: a space roaming society with 18th century technology. It must be the only true SF where the reader gets to blind the characters with science. This kind of thing is very hard to handle, there is a thin tightrope between serious anachronism and total farce. Of course many of the ideas are preposterous, but this is not our universe; the physical laws are not the same. The trick, done here marvellously, is to ensure that the new system is totally internally consistent.

This would be just another good genre SF adventure novel, but for the skill of the author. His central character is amazing, so much so that the other well drawn secondary characters are almost weak by comparison. Shaw is also an expert at generating a true sense of wonder, and it is here again, combining wooden spacestations and a lunatic attempt at true space travel.

Bob Shaw is probably the last of his breed; a British author of classic style SF. His product is considerably better than any of his American peers. Damn it, unlike most of them he can write!

If you still enjoy space opera read this and see how it should be done, if you gave it up in despair years ago this may be your one chance to regain forgotten pleasures.



VACUUM FLOWERS – Michael Swanwick
[Simon & Schuster, 1988, 248pp, £10.95]
Reviewed by Michael Fearn

DO YOU FANCY THE IDEA, AS YOU MIGHT change your clothes, of putting on a new persona to go out for the evening. Then go to your friendly local "wetware" programmer. "Wetware" is the name given by Swanwick to the technique of encoding skills or personality characteristics on wafers, and transferring them to a human recipient. It is a truly original term, and a concept upon which the author must be congratulated.

Rebel Elizabeth Mudlark is the construct of such a programme in human form: a prototype from a persona wafer which a multiplanetary company with the ethics of the intergalactic gutter wishes to market for megabig profits. Rebel, however, has other ideas and short-circuits the wetware interfacer. This makes her persona stick, though the memories of the original occupant of the body (her programmer) keep breaking through. Rebel's persona even survives the coldsleep of space travel – a unique trait.

Making her excuses and leaving, she is pursued by company agents through the slums of canister cities in space (which have all the allure of an overflowing chemical toilet) and in travelling space-hotels, which teem with the technogadgets of a cyberpunk wet dream. It soon becomes clear that Ms Mudlark is more than a mere fugitive. She is a unique piece of "wetechnics" and a lot of people want her. Her destiny is to negotiate humanity's future with the "Comprise", a super-mind into which all the members of the human race left on Earth have become conjoined. As her companion, she has her lover, Wyeth, a man with four synthetic personalities.

Seen in isolation, there is quite a lot of merit in the writer's style. If you wish to convey confusion and alienation, the scattershot exposition is a valid technique. Many of the ideas are also novel – the strong suit of good SF. The whole is less, unfortunately, than the sum of its parts.

As the heroine's initials (R.E.M.) are identical to those of dream sleep, possibly Swanwick believes that the future of mankind will be a dreamlike version of the confusion which pervades the first half of the book. If so, pass me the cyanide capsule. Perhaps he is simply underlining the need for all forms of humanity to co-exist. Frankly, the two questions are asked in a manner which leaves me without the slightest desire to hear the Swanwick answer. Maybe, judging by the glowing opinions on the dustjacket, my wetprogramming is wrong.

THE COMING OF THE KING – Nikolai Tolstoy
[Bantam, 1988, 606pp, £12.95]
Reviewed by Maureen Porter

NIKOLAI TOLSTOY HAS DEVOTED MANY years of research to the Matter of Britain, and more particularly, to the matter of Merlin. His scholarly work on the subject was marked by an obvious enthusiasm which rather swamped whatever academic points he tried to make. In this work of fiction — the first part, needless to say, of a projected trilogy — he does not wear his learning quite so lightly. Every little scrap of information he has ever gleaned on the subject appears to have been incorporated in the narrative. It's as though, unable to convey knowledge successfully through the academic medium, he has sought to pass on the fruits of his research through fiction. The result is almost indigestible.

I say "almost", because Tolstoy has a strong and vigorous prose style. It's far too discursive for his non-fiction, but had he not incorporated his notes, en masse, it would be ideal for a novel. Digging through the synthesis of all the stories of Merlin, not to mention most of the Mabinogion, it becomes clear that, as befits a direct descendant of Leo Tolstoy, he can tell a story, but seems to have been carried away by earnest attempts to communicate his own fascination. I'm sure there is a lot of useful and perhaps valuable information about Merlin contained within this novel, but how can one tell where fiction ends and fact, or at least fact according to Tolstoy, begins?

The temptation to dismiss this book out of hand is almost unbearable, but that would be a mistake. It may not be as readable as, for example, Mary Stewart's *The Crystal Cave*, but persevere past the shoals of unpronounceable names, Tolstoy's occasionally lamentable attempts to reproduce the style of the old chronicles, and the sheer density of events and information, and you will be rewarded with an absorbing beginning to the story of Merlin, and a quick tour round Welsh legends.

THE MAGAZINE NIGHTMARE BEGINS...

FILMS
VIDEO
BOOKS
FICTION
PERSONALITIES
NEWS
...AND A LOT OF FEAR!

Please note: the contents shown on the Issue 1 cover above are only intended to convey an impression and may not be the same as the contents actually published in the first issue.

SEND NOW FOR YOUR FIRST COPY!

I HAVE KNOWN NO FEAR AND WOULD LIKE TO TASTE SOME!

Please send me a copy of Issue 1 of **FEAR**, Britain's most exciting new Fantasy magazine, price £2.50 (post+packing included.)

Name .....

Address .....

.....

.....

..... Postcode .....

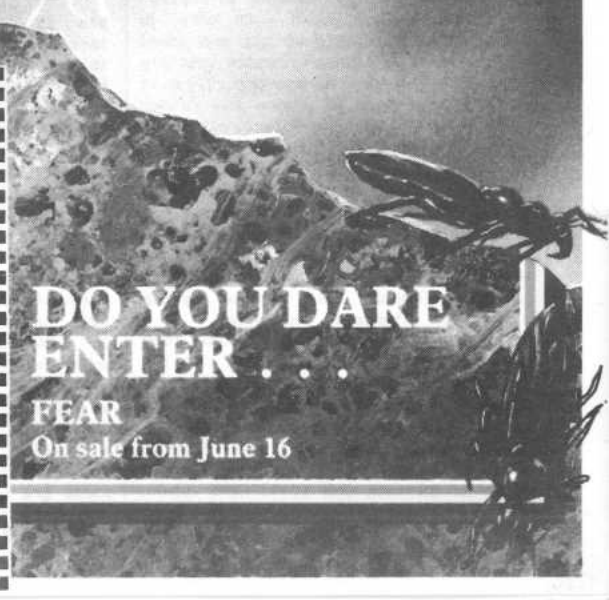
☐ I enclose £2.50 cheque
Made payable to **Newsfield Ltd** please.

☐ I enclose £2.50 postal order

On the other hand, I'm so excited by the prospect of **FEAR** that I would like to subscribe, and I understand that there is a subscribers' discount plan and some amazing special offers. Please send me the details immediately . . .
Please tick this box if you would like subscription details: ☐

Send form to:

FEAR OPENING OFFER, NEWSFIELD, PO BOX 20, LUDLOW, SHROPSHIRE SY8 1DB



DO YOU DARE ENTER . . .

FEAR
On sale from June 16