95p

VECTOR

145

The critical journal of the British Science Fiction Association

AUGUST/SEPTEMBER 1988

The Meaning of Pynchon

Reviewing a Review

PLUS

Book Reviews and Letters

VECTOR
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AUGUST/SEPTEMBER 1988

C O N T E N T S

Apologies:
First, to Kev McVeigh for changing his name and to Mike Christie for changing his title in V144;
Second, for held-over letters and any other shortcomings in this issue, compiled in the face of an ear operation and several weeks' recuperation. Thanks to people who've sent art and articles; I will be writing to you. — DVB.

Cover: 19th century engraving
Artwork on p 7: Julian R Bills

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 8EV. (USA: Cy Chauvin, 14248 Wilfred, Detroit, MI 48213.)

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

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

EDITORIAL

DAVID V BARRETT

VECTOR IS SUBTITLED "THE CRITICAL JOURNAL OF THE British Science Fiction Association". Some months ago a friend pointed out that it was a bit odd that we carry an ad for *Foundation* (subtitled "The review of Science Fiction"), claiming it to be "probably the best critical journal of science fiction in the world".

What? Better than us? And we're saying so?

Then there was a letter from Michael Moorcock in the July 1987 issue of *Australian Science Fiction Review*: "I'd like to see more ASFRs — it's about the best magazine in the SF world by the look of this issue".

And then there's the fact that unlike *Locus* and David Langford's sadly now defunct *Ansible*, *Vector*, so far as I know, has never won an award, whether as a fanzine, semi-prozine or whatever. (For the record, if you ever want to nominate it, *Vector* would normally count as a semi-prozine, though definitions seem to be flexible.)

For some BSFA members, *Foundation*, *ASFR*, *Locus*, *SF Chronicle* and others are familiar reading. For others, especially those without ready access to specialist shops, I suspect they are just names. I thought it might be worthwhile taking a brief look at some SF critical journals, semi-prozines and so on, to see what they offer that's different from *Vector*.

In Britain, as well as *Vector* and *Foundation*, critical work (by which I loosely mean articles about SF, interviews with authors, and substantial book reviews) also appears in *Interzone* and the new fiction magazine *Fear*. Then there are countless fanzines, of widely varying quality of both content and production. Some have little or nothing to do with SF; others tackle SF seriously and interestingly (though none measures up to *Arena*, a long-gone magazine by former *Vector* editor Geoff Rippington, in this respect). Some are badly typed and horribly produced; others are works of art, such as John Owen's *Crystal Ship*. *Concatenation #2*, edited by Jonathan Cowie and Tony Chester, shows what can be done with an occasional amateur magazine: gloss paper (though the layout is too reminiscent of a trade journal for my taste), and an interesting blend of science, space, fandom, articles and reviews. However fanzines, of all sorts, get a regular going over in *Matrix*, so I'll leave them at that.

Foundation is the journal of the Science Fiction Foundation, an academic body which, amongst other things, has an excellent SF reference library (of both fiction and non-fiction, books and magazines, and including the BSFA library). Although *membership* of the SFF is restricted to writers and critics, the magazine is available to anyone. There is some overlap between the writers of articles and reviews in *Foundation* and *Vector*, but the emphasis is different: *Vector* aims to be of interest to a general SF readership, while *Foundation* takes a very definitely academic approach. Its articles and reviews are generally both longer and deeper than ours; its readership might be expected to know the difference between post-structuralism and a pizza house. What it *isn't* is dry and boring, as academic journals often are; if you have a deep interest in SF and Fantasy (that's why you're in the BSFA!), you'll find it repays careful study.

ASFR is something of a cross between *Foundation* and *Vector*. I'd say that it's more idiosyncratic and personalised than *Foundation*, but its content is of a very high standard. It has a bias towards Australian writers and events in the same way as the BSFA has to British — i.e. this is the culture we live in and are familiar with and so are likely to write about, but by no means exclusively. It is edited (it seems in rotation) by a Melbourne group called the Science Fiction Collective, and, like *Vector*, has a strong pro-feminist stance.

(Speaking of feminism, I was sent a copy of *Cube #28*, the news-zine of the Wisconsin-based Society for the Furtherance and Study of Fantasy and Science Fiction (SF^3), which seems to have very strong links with Suzanne Haden Elgin's *Láadan Dictionary*. A long and largely favourable review of *V139*, the feminism & SF issue, ends "If this is a representative issue, then *Vector* is worth keeping an eye on". Thanks, Spike.)

Interzone regularly publishes some excellent interviews with authors, and has a couple of good solid book review columns, though the continuity and cohesion brought by having regular columnists is countered by the snag that if you and the reviewer like different types of SF, you're screwed. (Obviously that applies to the fiction in *IZ* as well; it never claimed to be a general or populist SF short story magazine.)

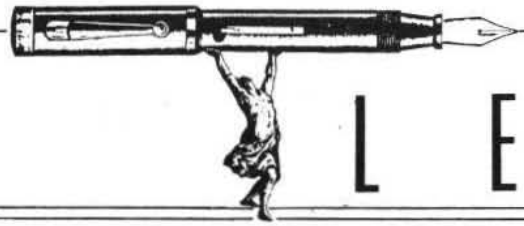
Fear is still very much an unknown quantity. Its first issue, published in June, was very heavily geared towards Horror, but the editor assures me that future editions will include far more Fantasy and SF. As well as fiction (and unlike *IZ*, *Fear* is quite definitely going for the mass market), *Fear* will have regular interviews, articles and both media and book reviews. Keep an eye on it; it may spring some surprises.

I've seen one issue of a new American magazine, *Science Fiction Eye*, and as that billed itself as a "Special Fiction Issue" it's not necessarily representative. (The first two issues focussed on cyberpunk, and on Philip K Dick.) It's published by a collective, and has a peculiar half-fannish, half-professional feel to it. There's a very long, very good, but very heavy interview with Samuel R Delany in #3, mainly on cyberpunk, and another article by Bruce Sterling. I don't think I'll be buying it again, but if you're a cyberpunk fan, go for it.

Which brings us to *Locus* and *Science Fiction Chronicle*. Both heavily American, the former calling itself "the newspaper of the science fiction field", the latter "the monthly SF and Fantasy newsmagazine". They're neither of them in any way a critical journal; I think I'm being kind to describe them as American equivalents of *Matrix* with colour covers and lots and lots and lots of publishers' ads. They're useful for American SF news and book reviews, and the ads at least keep you in touch with what's being published over the pond (what we get over here is the pick of the bunch, I assure you) — but they've never impressed me.

And *Vector*? — We aim to be interesting and instructive; at times erudite, but I'd like to think always enjoyable. Why don't we publish longer, in-depth reviews? one member asked me recently. Because we want to cover as many new SF, Fantasy (and related) titles as we possibly can. And with the calibre of some of our reviewers, it's amazing how in-depth you can get in 400 words! Critical analysis is sometimes improved by age, which is why we often take a long hard look at an SF classic (often under-rated or over-rated). We also have a deliberate policy of examining books or other artforms on the fringes of SF; I strongly believe that this is where much of the most interesting, innovative and significant work is appearing. And you'll read about it first in *Vector*.

Foundation, £2.95, £8.50/3 ± p.a.- SF Foundation, North East London Polytechnic, Longbridge Road, Dagenham, Essex RM8 2AS. Phone 01-590 7722 x 2177/9 for library opening times.
Interzone, £1.95, £11/6 ± p.a.- 124 Osborne Road, Brighton BN1 6LU.
Fear, £2.50, £12.50/6 ± p.a.- PO Box 20, Ludlow, Shropshire SY8 1DB.
ASFR, £2, £6 (payable to Joseph Nicholas)/6 ± p.a.- via 22 Denbigh Street, Pimlico, London SW1V 2ER.
Science Fiction Eye, £2.95 at FF, $12/3 ± p.a.- Box 43244, Washington DC, 20010-9244, USA.
Locus, $2.50, $27 ($45 air)/12 ± p.a.- via Fantast (Medway), PO Box 23, Upwell, Wisbech, Cambs PE14 9BU.
Science Fiction Chronicle, $2, £19 (payable to Algol Press)/12 ± p.a.- Ethel Lindsay, 69 Barry Road, Carnoustie, Angus DD7 7QQ.
Most are also available from Forbidden Planet, 71 New Oxford Street, London; Fantasy Inn, 17 Charing Cross Road, London; Andromeda Books, 84 Suffolk Street, Birmingham; & other specialist shops.



LETTERS

VECTOR 143

EDWARD JAMES
Department of History, University of York, YO1 5DD

I FOUND *VECTOR 143* COMPULSIVE READING, AS EVER. HOWEVER, one of the things it compelled this reader to do was to comment on your "Books of the Year 1987" section. I must say, immediately, that I do so from a particular stance — as administrator of the Arthur C Clarke Award for the best SF novel whose first UK publication was in 1987 — but I write from my own viewpoint, not that of the selection panel as a whole. I read over 50 books submitted by publishers — very few of which actually cropped up in the various shortlists chosen by your 15 contributors, and few of which, indeed, deserved to. Your contributors had the advantage, of course, of being able to name anthologies, short story collections, Fantasy, non-fiction books, all of which were outside the scope of the Arthur C Clarke Award. If I had been asked for my "Books of the Year" some of them might well have been in these categories.

However, I am not going to write my own list: I want to comment on your own remark that "it always seems to me that the best SF doesn't win awards". It's an unexceptional remark (I am sure I've written almost the same myself), but it does beg a number of questions. You were writing in the context of wondering why John Crowley's *Ægypt* was on our shortlist (and the BSFA's), although it was not SF, while, for instance, Mary Gentle's *Ancient Light* was on no-one's shortlist. Well, the Crowley was submitted to us by Gollancz, so Gollancz at least must have a broad enough definition of SF to allow *Ægypt* to slip in. It is not *science* fiction, certainly, although it is about science; but could it not be regarded as speculative fiction in its broadest sense, speculating about alternative possible views of history and our present condition? The omission of Mary Gentle's book (or Gene Wolfe's, or Iain Bank's, or...) is a different problem, and illustrates something about SF awards chosen by panels which you seem to overlook. No panel is going to have six panelists each of whom come up with precisely the same six or seven books for the shortlist; inevitably there has to be bargaining, compromise, lengthy discussion...

Ultimately the problem lies in that phrase you used: "the best SF". "Best" in what sense? — the most readable, the most entertaining, the most original, the most literate, the most thought-provoking, the book that you most want *everyone* to read? A Hugo or a Nebula or a BSFA Award is much easier: that represents "the best" in the sense of "the one the most people in the selecting group want to win". But a small selection panel such as the one choosing the Arthur C Clarke Award winner actually does have to sit down and argue which is "the best". Each member will have his or her own personal favourites; but each will have to recognise that there are some principles other than mere subjective approval which have to be taken into account. Some abstract idea of literary or novelistic quality has to be there, and ideas about originality, or even entertainment. There is even the idea of trying to push a book as one which *should* be read as widely as possible. And also, which is more questionable perhaps, the idea that a book emblazoned with "Winner of the Arthur C Clarke Award for the Best SF Book Published in Britain in 1987" ought to be a book which any non-SF reader could pick up, recognise as SF, and also perceive as worthwhile literature. A Hugo or a BSFA Award can, if you like, be awards within the genre, which may have little impact outside it, and which indeed can go to genre books that are hardly comprehensible to non-SF readers. But the winners of the Arthur C Clarke Award, I feel (and this is a feeling shared by fellow-panelists), ought to be the sort of books that can attract new readers to science fiction and increase general awareness of the importance of SF, not just within 20th century literature but as an indispensable tool for understanding our world and where it's heading. As such the superb book by George Turner, *The Sea and Summer*, was the only book to choose (though Lem's *Fiasco* ran it a close second). Its disaster theme might make it seem corny to some hardboiled (and narrow-minded) fans, even though it incorporates much more up-to-date science and social extrapolation than any other disaster novel of the 1980s. But it is beautifully crafted, movingly told, with deftly drawn characterisation.

The best SF *can* win awards. It's just a question of deciding what you mean by "best"...

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

THE VARIOUS LOOKS BACK AT 1987 (*V143*) WERE INTERESTING, if only to see how much I actually missed. I was shocked to look through Caroline Mullan's *Locus* lists and discover that I have read just 12 of those 84 so far. Yet there is an enormous amount I did read that was not there. These were British, or older books. When I saw these books originally a thought struck me, concerning the old argument between SF and Fantasy, as to where the boundary should lie. The author in question this time is KW Jeter — his first two novels are most decisively SF, *Dr Adder* and *The Glass Hammer*, but the two listed by *Locus* are very different. *Dark Seeker* is quite strongly a Horror novel, possibly Horror-Fantasy if you want to be precise. *Infernal Devices* is a Science Fantasy of the kind that is *almost* SF, and *almost* Fantasy, but not quite either. *Locus* may have decided that its Victorian setting merited the Fantasy label, but I would suggest that the two titles should be in the opposite categories. The Best First Novels list is very useful though, but I don't expect to see many of these for quite some time, popular names like Cadigan and Blumlein apart that is.

I have to say that Paul Kincaid got nearer to what I would like from a review than your piece in *V142*. I find reading reviews a peculiar thing, for several reasons. First, I tend to consider my view of the author, if I have one, and then whether I have agreed with previous reviews by the person concerned. These colour a review quite considerably. Take Nik Morton's two very favourable reviews of Storm Constantine's *Wraeththu*, two books I really enjoyed, yet I found myself disagreeing with Nik about aspects he had "misinterpreted" or ignored. It seems that it is difficult for a review to stand alone. I recently read two reviews of a new book about Sylvia Plath; both concentrated on the subject rather than the book, which I found disappointing to see in *The Times* and *The Independent*. However the former was the worse offender in giving just one line to the merit of the work, and then producing a potted biography of Plath. Surely this is not the point of a review; I certainly expect an indication of the plot but not a detailed synopsis including the ending.

I also find that a review can cast light on other books, unmentioned, which are not the subject of the

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review. Part of this is due to compartmentalisation, but it can also be a recognition of less direct similarity or shared allusion. It is difficult then to interpret a review from a general viewpoint, and so to shape it for maximum merit to most people.

HELEN McNABB
The Bower, High Street, Llantwit Major, S Glamorgan

I'VE BEEN MEANING TO WRITE AND CONGRATULATE YOU ON *VECtor* for some time. I have been enjoying it a great deal and loved the article on Judge Dee — I've been a fan of his for years; how about one on JB Priestly's Fantasy novels?

«Why not? Would you like to write it, Helen?»

I also meant to reply to the letter from Keith Roberts before now... It would not surprise me to hear that *Grainne* was wrtitten before *Kaeti*, in fact I feel quite relieved to hear it because I felt that *Kaeti* is the very much better book (you can tell that from the reviews I suppose) and she is a more complete character. I have various friends who enthuse about *Grainne* more, and although I enjoyed it and I can see that the plot is perhaps more ambitious in some ways than that of *Kaeti*, nevertheless *Kaeti* has infinitely more depth. I never grasped hold of *Grainne*, elements of the plot and most of her character remained a mystery to me, and I felt that parts of her remained a mystery to Keith Roberts too, whereas Kaeti became a friend and the layers of meaning in the novel (which it is, not a collection of short stories) make it far more intriguing and stimulating than *Grainne*.

As for him not daring to create an ideal woman... well, I'm not so sure. He is intensely interested in women, in what makes them tick, and creating a believable woman is not always an easy thing for a man to do, especially as a central character. I think he does do it, and I also think that in doing so he creates a woman who fits in with the type of woman he likes and is interested in, so that she may become, for him, the ideal woman.

That is open to debate and discussion, and I am in no way adamant about it, but it is an interesting point...

In the meantime keep up the good work — I'm enjoying the criticism pieces, they are fascinating. How to do/not do what you are doing yourself!

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JIM ENGLAND
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CONGRATULATIONS ON REACHING 20TH ISSUE.

I have an idea for increasing the finances of the BSFA and hence, if desired, the membership, so simple that I'm surprised you didn't mention it at the end of your editorial, as part of your appeal to members, and also that (to my knowledge) no previous editor has. If the idea has been considered and for some strange reason been rejected before, I would be interested to know the reason. Simply, the idea is that members should be asked to leave money to the BSFA in their Wills and, perhaps, be given advice on how to do this.

It occurs to me that some would also be glad to leave their SF libraries to the BSFA. I think this has been done in the past. Could we have information about the SF Lending Library? I may not have been taking notice, but it seems a long time since I heard any reference to its being used.

«I can't see anybody leaving us all their worldly wealth, but certainly members bequeathing part or all of their SF collections is an excellent idea (much better than the recently bereaved carting boxes of books to the local second hand book shop for a couple of tenners). The BSFA Library is now part of the Foundation Library; see this issue's editorial; further details will appear in Matrix shortly.»

Apropos of your editorial, I must say that (like your others) it shows, on the whole, admirable rationality and clarity of expression. I do *not* think you are "too political". But I am puzzled by your stated belief that it is impossible "to separate out politics from SF (or from anything else)". Where, I ask in all innocence, do you get that idea? It's the "anything else" that worries me and which I would like you to reconsider. Funnily enough, last night on TV, I heard some musician say, "Music is political", and was flummoxed again, being unable to imagine the sound of political music. Next, I will be hearing "Pure mathematics is political" or something else equally ridiculous. (Sure, I can imagine some addled intellectual saying: "*People* listen to music and do mathematics and look at the sky, see, and where you get people you get politics, so the sky, etc, etc, is political", but it would seem distorted logic to me, contributing nothing useful to any discussion.) Where is this everything-is-political dogma being taught?

«Maybe I should have said "... anything else concerning people*". The pure mathematician, or history or English Lit lecturer or student who finds that courses and research projects are cancelled through lack of government funding; the computer programmer (and there's a lot in*

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the BSFA) who is faced with a moral dilemma when his or her coding is to guide a missile; the pop singer whose single is banned by the BBC because it attacks Clause 28; the SF or Fantasy writer who can't get a new book published because of the current ideological climate...; that's what I mean by "everything-is-political".»

As I say, I don't think you are too political, but I think a number of your correspondents are too narrowly so. They proseletise in favour of various -isms with all the sophistication of market traders selling goods that "fell off the back of a lorry", and the goods are nearly always shoddy. Shout our slogan, they seem to say, and you are either for us or against us. Like Big-Endians and Little-Endians arguing about the right way to chop the top off an egg! Being blessed with the intelligence and imagination of SF readers, one would think they might see how narrow their fashionable social concerns are likely to appear from the long perspective of future history; limited to particular parts of the world and periods of time in it...

I was fascinated by Kev McVeigh's article on cyberpunk and found that I approved of its trademarks. Dave Garnett's article was amusing. Mike Christie's axe-grinding article appeared obscurantist and silly; it cheapened itself by constant references to *The Hitch Hiker's Guide* for the sake of a catchy title when so much "serious" SF could have been discussed. Kev McVeigh's quote from Alexander Pope in the Letters column seemed relevant to it: "Words are like leaves; and where they most abound/Much fruit of sense beneath is rarely found."

«I thought Mike's use of Hitch Hiker *for his examples lightened what could have been a very heavy article. Here's some further discussion of it:»*

KV BAILEY
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V144'S CRITICAL FEAST HAD A CONTENT OF ITEMS REMARKABLY varied, though at points subtly inter-relatable. The most intricate was Mike Christie's "Guide" which took a good deal further, more controversially, and with more exemplifying detail, his *V139* exposition. The critical pastiches made their point nicely, though the more contemporary they were the apter they became. Neither Matthew Arnold nor TS Eliot was easily recognisable in the prose representing them. I appreciate Mike Christie's reason for not providing a post-structuralist examination of *Hitch Hiker*; but this, on the given premise, surely indicates an obligation to apply the method to his own essay; at which point the whole critical exercise begins to melt back into its ideological foundations, gorgeous palaces, solemn temples and all. Come back Arnold, come back Eliot — all, or nearly all, is forgiven. (It was Eliot who wrote of Matthew Arnold that "... he had neither walked in hell nor been rapt to heaven; but what he did know, of men and books, was well-balanced and well-marshalled." You cannot help feeling on firm ground there.)

It would be interesting to see what might come of substituting as text Kathleen Raine's for Douglas Adams's. Her "Sleep of Albion" fragment (also *V144*) in essence states, in contexts of both myth and history, the inadequacies of reductionism and the relativities of human rule, law and order. I guess Mike Christie's critical progression might then run along much the same lines, finishing again in his structuralist's conclusion that "Arthur... is the remnant of another many to one situation" — but substituting Arturius Rex for Arthur Dent! After that the solemn temples dissolve once more; but when all has been deconstructed (things like "the Eternal Feminine", the "Round Table" and the "Matter of Britain") is there perhaps an indissoluble residue? Such as what Kathleen Raine describes as "a sense of glory and cosmic significance"?

In Kev McVeigh's letter-turned-article I rather lost the wood for the trees. We emerged, however, after a grand and exhaustive, if exhausting, tour to the conclusion that "cyberpunk's sole feature so far is all the talk about it". Collapse into thin air of yet more cloud capp'd towers! More puncturings and collapses, occasioned by David Garnett's onslaught on *A Time Before Genesis*, left behind not so much thin air as an expiring monster; but long before it expired the endless skilful and relentless sticking-in of darts evoked a kind of pity. One wished for the *coup de grace*. How to come to this more quickly was very well demonstrated by Helen McNabb (in *PI72*), taking on the work of a much more seasoned "victim" — Gordon R Dickson's *Way of the Pilgrim*. However, I find myself tempted to plumb the depths of *A Time of Genesis* if only in the hope of learning more about HV Potter, author of *Fairies in the Garden*. Could this mystery man turn out to be a new-found Kilgore Trout?

KEITH BROOKE
12 Western Hill Road, Beckford, nr Tewkesbury, Glos GL20 7AJ

THANKS FOR ANOTHER GOOD ISSUE OF *VECTOR (#144)* AND CONgratulations on your three years as editor — I'll look forward to another three!

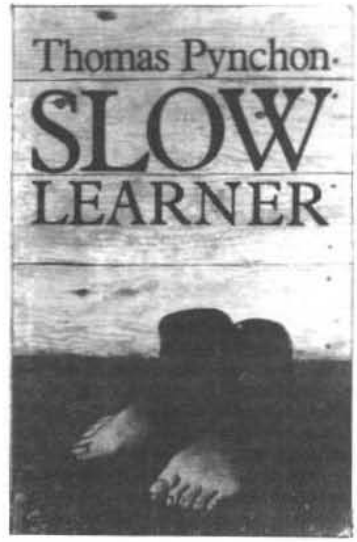
«Thanks — but Help! No!»

Perhaps inevitably, my first comments will be on Kev McVeigh's "Schism, Mirror, Lens". Although I don't wholeheartedly agree with the conclusions I was pleased to see a well-balanced article on the subject as opposed to either outright denial or blatant hype. I think the major flaw in Kev's analysis is that, although late in the article he recognises the fact that writers of cyberpunk do not only write cyberpunk, earlier in the article he seems to be confused about why, for example, Sterling, the cyberpunk, should write a first novel that is fairly run-of-the-mill SF. This misunderstanding led him to labeling Robinson and Shepard as cyberpunks, rather than "writers who have written cyberpunk" and the then inevitable confusion caused by those writers' more humanist or mainstream SF work. Of course Sterling and Gibson don't always write about sleazy computer worlds, and equally obviously other writers who have only rarely dabbled in cyberpunk will write about alternatives too; in the same way M John Harrison, for example, sometimes writes SF, sometimes Fantasy, and sometimes non-fiction about rock-climbing.

One thing that struck me throughout Kev's article was the desire to draw boundaries: this is cyberpunk, *this* is not; he's a cyberpunk, *he's* not. SF that can be labeled cyberpunk or humanist doesn't *have* sharp boundaries as SF, itself, is often difficult to separate from the mainstream (does Ian McEwan write SF? — does that make him an SF writer? Kurt Vonnegut Jr? DM Thomas?

I was curious to read the review of Michael Swanwick's *Vacuum Flowers* and Michael Fearn's delight in the "truly original term" *wetware*. Although Swanwick's use of the wetware concept is, indeed, very skilled (the whole book is full of wonderful, throwaway touches), the term itself and the concept of encoding skills and personality traits on some sort of wafer is older than that. Around the time *Vacuum Flowers* was first published in *Asimov's* (early 1987) Rudy Rucker was completing a sequel to *Software* called... *Wetware* (he wants to follow these with several more, including *Limpware*, *Senileware* and *Noware*). That's just from checking an old *Interzone* — I'm sure the idea has been around a lot longer, at least as long as (dare I mention it?) cyberpunk.

LIFE, LITERATURE AND ENTROPY



MARK GORTON

WHEN THE WORD "ENTROPY" WAS COINED IN THE 19TH century by a German physicist investigating thermodynamics, it referred to the amount of energy in a closed system which is unavailable to do work. Since then the meaning of "entropy" has been expanded by 20th century mathematics, which have even found it an important place in communication theory.

Science fiction is no stranger to the word either. "Entropy" punctuated the apocalyptic experiments of the New Wave; JG Ballard's landscapes are often called "entropic"; Philip K Dick imagined an alien cosmology in which the entropy principle is an anarchic deity called "The Form Destroyer".

But one writer above all has been gripped by the word and the many layers of meaning it can generate. His name is Thomas Pynchon, a remarkable fantasist whose work is underwritten by science in general and thermodynamics in particular.

IF HE EXISTS, THOMAS PYNCHON IS NOW FIFTY YEARS OLD. I have read everything he has written — at least under that name — and a great deal of material generated by the Pynchon industry. And yet, even though he is "one of the greatest novelists writing in English", I know as little about him as anyone else.

Who is Pynchon? No one can really say. Where is Pynchon? Same reply: his fame coincided with a remarkable disappearance. What does he look like? Well, on this one at least we can hazard a guess, thanks to the solitary photograph which purports to be an early likeness, taken during his student days.

But maybe it's not even him anyway; maybe the snapshot's just a decoy. Some have claimed that Pynchon is really JD Salinger, because the rise of the former was mirrored by the decline of the latter. Others argue that texts drawing on almost every field of human endeavour could not be the work of an individual: no polymath, no matter how brilliant, could parody Jacobean tragedy, discuss the physics of plastics and probe the complexities of communication theory, with equal skill. And that's just a fraction of his expertise. Therefore, Pynchon must be a committee.

Whatever, let's suppose that Thomas Ruggles Pynchon was born on May 8th 1937 on Long Island, New York; that he went to Cornell University to major in Engineering, served in the US Navy, returned to Cornell and switched his attentions to Literature, wrote some short stories, graduated with "distinction in all subjects", found a job with the Boeing Corporation (on my desk there's a piece of Pynchon non-fiction, an article called "Togetherness", all about the airlifting of Bomarc guided missiles, written for *Aerospace Safety* in 1960), and then published as his first novel, *V.*, 23 years ago to great acclaim.

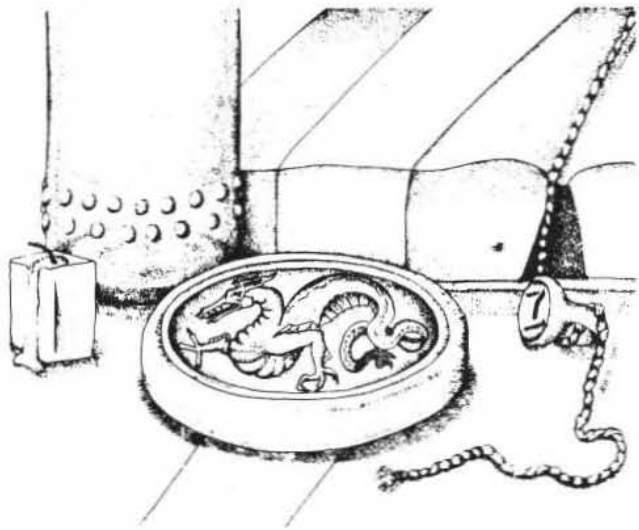
There have been two more novels since then, but apart from that, save for a piece of journalism, a

WRITING SCIENCE FICTION

Christopher Evans
(A&C Black, 1988, 97pp, £4.95)

IN SEVERAL RECENT ISSUES WE HAVE FEATURED NEW non-fiction books about science fiction, fantasy or related subjects. We originally intended to do the same with Chris Evans's new book, but because it is about how to write SF (and because he was one of the first co-editors of *Focus*) it seemed more fitting that this should appear in *Focus* rather than in *Vector*.

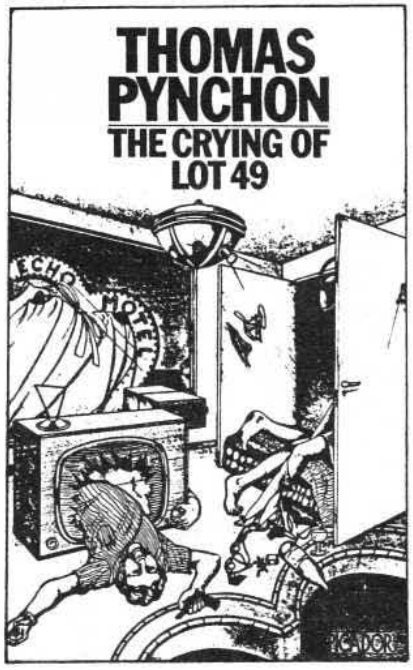
I enjoyed Chris's book, and find some of it very helpful. I'd like to recommend it to all our members who write SF or Fantasy, particularly those at the beginning of their writing careers. — DVB



charming introduction to a collection of his apprentice short fiction, and the odd letter, nothing. "Zilch," as Kurt Vonnegut would say, "doodley-squat."

Thomas Pynchon ceased to be.

And some might say this is just another index of Pynchon's genius. His privacy pre-empted fashionable literary theory that texts must be severed from authors and their biographies. Fans of Roland Barthes trumpeted "The Death of the Author" with great vigour; Pynchon made life easy by committing literary suicide. Mind you, if Pynchon is The Invisible Man, he is also Frankenstein's Monster; fashionable literary theory notwithstanding, readers, like me, will assemble him from the million spare parts of personality scattered throughout his writings. Sketching, I assume he is very much like his novels: funny, sad, complex, baffling, engaging yet frustrating, with a generous heart in the right place: with the neglected and the rejected, namely, to borrow his borrowed terms, the Preterite, those for whom The System, controlled by the Elect, has little or no use.



Pynchon, then, has given us a handful of early short stories and three novels. *V.* (1963), riddled by tunnels and labyrinths, burrows through our century of power politics and total wars; *The Crying of Lot 49* (1967) paints an amusing but dismal picture of the failures of communication in modern America; while above the war-shattered world of the huge *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973) hovers the ballistic parabola of the V2 rocket, forerunner of the ICBMs which may one day deliver the ultimate release of energy... and the ultimate triumph of entropy.

Entropy? What the hell is "entropy"?

The answer is as simple as it is difficult. Entropy belongs to physics, to the second law of thermodynamics. But, even though the second law is the fundamental rule of life and death (and despite CP Snow, who, in his determination to unite our "Two Cultures", described it as just the sort of science with which artists should be intimately familiar) entropy, like Pynchon, is an enigma. Which is hardly surprising, because thermodynamics and entropy ain't easy concepts for physicists, let alone readers of fiction.

But they must be tackled if we want to tackle Pynchon, for most of his fiction is underwritten by entropy as metaphor.

So, here goes.

The term was coined by German physicist Rudolf Clausius in 1854. "The energy of the universe is constant. The entropy of the universe tends towards a maximum." Because heat can only flow spontaneously in one direction — from hot bodies to cold — every spontaneous energy change in an isolated system must be irreversible. Moreover, every irreversible change must be accompanied by a loss in the amount of energy available to do work. Entropy is the measure of this loss. So, in the isolated system of the universe (by definition there can be nothing outside it, Clausius argued), the increase must go on until it can increase no further; that is, until all energy has degraded into heat, uniformly distributed, and all the substance of the universe is at the same (very low) temperature. This is a prediction of cosmic dissolution — "the heat death of the universe" — which came as a shock to Victorians raised on Newtonian principles of conservation, and Darwinian ideas of universal progress. William Paley had likened Creation to a watch, to prove the existence of a Great Designer; he did not take to analogy to its conclusion, that the watch might also be winding down. But, according to thermodynamics, the universe was indeed ticking its way towards a final motionless state.

Thomas Hardy noted this removal into a deathward universe in his novel of 1882, *Two on a Tower*. His astronomer hero, Swithin St Cleeve, gazes at the Milky Way with Viviette Constantine. He remarks: "And to add a new weirdness to what the sky possesses in its size and formlessness, there is involved the quality of decay. For all the wonder of these everlasting stars, eternal spheres, and what not, they are not everlasting, they are not eternal; they burn out like candles."

To a modern physicist, entropy is not only the measure of energy "unavailable to do work" in a system, but also the measure of the system's disorganisation, a measure of its molecular randomness. A system in a good state of repair, a vital system, is low in entropy and therefore highly ordered. Though here — and this is crucial to Pynchon's metaphor — order means differentiation, not uniformity. Statistically speaking, a closed system will always seek its most probable state, which means chaos, undifferentiation and (heat) death.

Which is where the paradox of life comes in. An adult specimen of either plant or animal represents a complex, highly ordered and improbable system, a system of low entropy, high differentiation, resisting inherent instability. This instability is writ large at death, when the system collapses and finds its most probable condition. The organism rots and, in accord with physics and the Scriptures, returns to the dust from whence it came.

Mathematically, it seems, life is therefore an anomaly. What's more, life is a counterforce against entropy. Living organisms are not closed systems; and they are able, for a short time at least, to swim against the inevitable tide, by assimilating negative entropy: sunlight, water and minerals in the case of a plant; while animals — and this is where physics and metaphor begin to merge — can flout the second law by consuming food and information.

Mankind also maintains social systems. To do so we must devour vast quantities of energy, and generate massive entropy. (Claude Levi Strauss even suggested that Man is little more than a tool of the second law of thermodynamics; ordered societies are an illusion; they pay the price demanded by physics and are merely speeding the inevitable "heat death", a notion well in tune with apocalyptic visions of a bombed-out or resourceless future.) But what about the spiritual or human condition of those systems? Collectively we do have the power to resist entropy. We must keep our systems open and covet diversity if we wish to be truly alive. 'Trouble is, do we? And are we?

This, it seems to me, is at the heart of Pynchon's principle scientific metaphor. What's more, the thought that it may not be metaphor at all niggles Pynchon throughout. Are we, in a very real sense, threatened by a universal conspiracy? Because the second law is merely a new guise for Old Nick, the Devil himself. Satan, determined to return the cosmos to its original formlessness, is the anti-Logos, the spreader of confusion. Pope pre-empted this idea in *The Dunciad*, his own vision of cultural entropy: here the obscene goddess Dulness, "Daughter of Chaos and eternal night", aims to reduce all things to "one dead level"; she reduces language to sheer noise. Pynchon, who enjoys a similar slapstick sense of humour and equal poetic gifts, harbours comparable fears,

thoroughly explored in *Gravity's Rainbow*. If ever there were agents of a thermodynamic Satan abroad on earth, they were surely the designers of The Third Reich: enemies of diversity, ruthless controllers of information, advocates of an order which is really living death, makers of total war, the ultimate reductive process. The rainbow itself is the architecture of Nazi science: the ballistic flight of the rocket which still hangs heavy over the world, whispering hideous promises of global entropy.

But if there is a "thermodynamic conspiracy" there remains the opportunity to resist, and time after time in his fiction Pynchon examines what we might call the politics of entropy. Can we reform our social systems? Reverse the deathward trend? And if so, how?

It may well be that there is no way out of the labyrinth; no organised "counterforce"; no solution to the universal detective mystery which enfolds us; no final clarity where before there were only random and meaningless clues. There is, however, the possibility; and there is also The Quest. Though its geography may be dismal (the shadowed streets which recede in Vs towards darkness, streets which riddle our selves as well as our towns and cities), The Quest represents motion, not dead stillness. Oedipa Maas, heroine of *The Crying of Lot 49* is bombarded by clues and signs which seem to indicate the presence of another America built within the empty spaces of peoples' lives; she knows it may be unreal:

> She touched the end of its voluptuous field, knowing it would be lovely beyond dreams to submit to it; that not gravity's pull, laws of ballistics, feral ravening, promised more delight... But then she wondered if the gemlike "clues" were only some kind of compensation. To make up for her having lost the direct, epileptic Word, the cry that might abolish the night.

And yet her journey is a hopeful one, because if there is hope, it lies in the poetic faculty, in imagination, too often neutralised by highly probable mass media messages, the modern heat death, social systems in which each point has the same amount of imaginative energy, in which there's a real danger imaginative motion will come to a halt.

Borges described the "aesthetic reality" as the "imminence of a revelation that is not yet produced"; Pynchon's fiction teeters forever on that brink. Like the short wave band at night, in this world of countless messages, other words are being spoken, words we can't quite make out. Most stories, histories and news stories order events which would otherwise be random and chaotic and more horrific for being so; we are experts when it comes to making bad dreams safe. Pynchon's fiction dramatically eschews that function; it submerges us deep in nightmares, but at the same time yields hope of a genuine awakening, a tuning in, the hope that the revelation will be produced. We have prepared ourselves for a cataclysmic apocalypse in the shadow of "gravity's rainbow"; it may bring about the final dead state of our closed systems. And yet, biologically, we are each of us open systems, able to swim upstream in the dark river, in common with the rest of Nature, which, literally against all the odds, remains regenerative. The second law of thermodynamics can be re-stated as "death by confinement"; if the rainbow is to take on the colours seen by Lawrence, "a new growth, rising to the light and the wind and the clear rain of heaven", then we must open up our systems, our hearts, and our minds.

• *Pynchon's novels and* Slow Learner, *a collection of his early short stories, are published in Britain by Picador. An excellent study of Pynchon's fiction, written by Tony Tanner, from whose criticism I have profited, is included in the "Contemporary Writers" series published by Methuen.*

THE ACONITED STING

ANDY SAWYER

SO WHAT IS THIS REVIEWING GAME ABOUT ANYWAY? Adapting the old joke — was it Bob Dylan when quizzed about one of his songs? — I'd say "about 300 words". And please let me have them by Friday.

Instead of offering a theoretical construct, I'd like to test a few theories by talking about some of the practicalities of writing book reviews. Let's look at an actual book review and see some of the constraints and demands which have forced it into the shape it has. It goes without saying that I'm using one of my own reviews, not solely through reasons of ego (would I be so conceited?) but rather for the simple reason that I can trace how and why that review came to be written, in a manner impossible if I were to use someone else's. And here's the first instance in how factors which have little directly to do with a piece of writing shape it into the form it takes: I need a review which is broadly favourable to the book (I'm laying myself open enough here without pillorying other writers!) and which I'm happy enough with as a review to reproduce for examination but which contains areas I can point to as in need of repair. So this is a review written by me of a review written by me, which should be self-referential enough for the most avant-garde critic.

One point: if by this process the "review" becomes a "critical" piece, expanding areas not directly mentioned in the text of the review, that perhaps highlights the relationship between the two forms. But I hope that most points made in my expansion are implicit in the review itself. That, to me, is a measure of its success or failure.

What forms the language of a review? The tone of a review depends on its audience. I don't review much for *Vector* but I've noticed that when I do so I tend to use more formal language. A review I've recently submitted to the *Assistant Librarian* — of a research report aimed at librarians interested in the provision of materials in ethnic-minority languages — is more formal still, in that it's aimed at people seeking information rather than a fun read. *Paperback Inferno* reviews are, I hope, different from *Vector* reviews: the ideal *PI* review is briefer, more succinct, partly because *Vector* as a "Critical Journal" should have longer, more analytic reviews and partly because I aim to cover about 50 books in each issue. This means that *PI* reviews are sometimes more "popular" with a lot more of a "reader to reader" feel about them, but with such a lot of material to cover I do find it more interesting to have a variety of tones from a variety of reviewers. Some people write from an academic background, others as fairly new but enthusiastic readers of SF, others simply as people who have read a great deal of the stuff over the years and have developed a feel for it. Some have a Grand Unified Theory of SF, others are guided by individual response to each book. And tastes, of course, are different. It would be possible to get totally contradictory reviews of virtually any book simply by sending copies of it to carefully selected reviewers.

This leads us to the jibe that's so often made about book reviews: that they're just one person's opinion. And yes, even if that one person is the world's leading expert on the subject, that is so. But Paul Kincaid, in his contribution to this series in *V143*, stressed the obvious point that a review is a piece of *writing*. Writing does not exist in a vacuum. All writing assumes an audience, not just — as I've discussed in the previous paragraph — in terms of what language to use, how to "pitch" your writing, but more fundamentally. Expressing views which may be agreed or disagreed with, conducting an argument; that is part of the reviewer's task. There are two sides to any review: the writer and the reader, and the reader is different every time the review is read. (In fact, there are three sides because the reviewer him/herself is already taking part in a debate with the author of the book in question). In essence a review is a complex series of relationships between author, reviewer and reader of the review. Where the first and third are the same and the reviewer has wielded the axe a little too forcefully — why, that's when the fun begins.

All this, of course, is hardly new. The Jacobean dramatist Thomas Dekker complained about "the Aconited sting of a narrow-eyed Critic" (*The Wonderful Year*, 1603), and wrote that:

> To come to the press is more dangerous than to be pressed to death, for the pain of those tortures last for a few minutes, but he that lives upon the rack in print hath the flesh torn off by the teeth of Envy and Calumny even when he means nobody any hurt in his grave.
>
> (*News From Hell*, 1607)

Even when a review is utterly adulatory, the reader might disagree... but that's the nature of the game. Let's see how it actually works in one instance; my review of Ann Halam's *King Death's Garden* from *PI 73*, reprinted here:

> ***KING DEATH'S GARDEN*** **IS SUBTITLED "A GHOST story", but there's a curious tension in the book between interpretations of what that means. It becomes obvious fairly early on that Noth, the strange wild girl whom lonely asthmatic Maurice meets in the cemetery behind his great-aunt's house, is supernatural, but of what order? Is she connected to Maurice's visions of the past? And are they vivid dreams, or real glimpses into other memories?**
>
> **Maurice tries to make sense of his experiences, although those detailed in the diary written by Professor Baxter, who once owned Great-Aunt Ada's house, are apparently even stranger. Ann Halam (better known to those who don't read children's books as SF writer Gwyneth Jones) has written a ghost story which tries to avoid the implications of that term only to have them at last revealed when they cannot be fled from. Up until the final pages after the climactic scene in the cemetery with the shadows coming almost into full view and Maurice clinging desperately to the idea of "vibrations... chemical patterns", unable even to *articulate* the word "dead", *King Death's Garden* is a subtle, complex story, full of almost cinematic allusiveness. Maurice experiences the inexplicable, which leads to a horror he can hardly cope with but which is, in the end, cathartic, a healing rather than a scarring. From our privileged standpoint as readers we see an isolated, self-centred semi-invalid shown on more than one level that other minds, other people, are as real as he.**
>
> **Don't be fooled by the "Puffin" label; this is a very powerful ghost story indeed.**

HERE FOLLOW SOME OF MY REACTIONS ON RE-READING THAT review, with comments on what I was thinking about when I wrote it.

The first paragraph has perhaps too many questions and reads more like a blurb than a review, it now seems

to me. I wanted to mention the enigmatic Moth — clearly an elemental sprite but there is a hint at the end that she herself may be a ghost. The first draft of the review in fact began with much more in the way of plot summary, but was rewritten to focus upon what to me is the important element in *King Death's Garden*: the ambiguity of the "ghost" element in the ghost story.

The second paragraph — more successfully, I feel — is concerned with three main points.

First, *we* know that this is a ghost story. Maurice tries not to. He is aware of, but tries to overlook, Moth's strangeness. She shows him a blue-tit's nest and tells him that there are twelve chicks:

> "Twelve? How do you know?"
>
> "Easy. I counted."
>
> "Oh, very funny. Didn't you find it a bit dark in that hole?"
>
> "Oh yes. And smelly. I kept stepping in bird dirt."

She had a very childish sense of humour...

Maurice tries to think of his dreams as stemming from a scientific rather than a supernatural source, using the fact that they are clearly visions of the past to support his theory that he is experiencing a kind of mental time travel. He finds Professor Baxter's belief in Fairies a "serious disappointment":

> At the back of his mind, Maurice had been counting on the mysterious scientist. The Professor Baxter connection made his exile respectable. He had pictured himself discovering the lost formula, something as important as relativity, unrecognised by his ignorant family all these years.

Even after his dreams and his experiences with Moth, and events which can only be called "supernatural", Maurice clings to rational terms, writing to Caltec with his dream experiences. (Shades of Adrian Mole writing to the BBC!)

And at the end, the explanation that the shadows waiting to claim Maurice are "just — chemical patterns. Images from the past, somehow regenerated..." isn't *enough*: Maurice can achieve, like Moth, freedom from a Cruel World, but

> "I won't be able to play about like that any more," thought Maurice regretfully. "Not in the daytime anyway, I suppose. I'll be d—"
>
> He felt as if he had pulled himself up on the edge of a fearful cliff.
>
> His heart began to beat very fast. He was afraid he wasn't going to be able to breathe. And the things that were d— and wanted him to be d— too were watching, waiting. Not "harmless chemical patterns" after all. Oh, he had known it from the first, only he just didn't like the word.

Death is not cosy. It's a mystery and a terror. I think of two things when I write the review; first, what's pointed out in the text about Maurice's self-centredness, snooping on the memories of dead *people* ("People who've been left to rest in peace probably have a right to expect just that") and, second, my own nightmares as a child in which I knew that I was about to confront a g— but could *not* articulate the word "ghost" for all the terror that it brought, even though the only way to wake up was to scare myself awake. The first is what I think about as the reviewer and critic, but it's the second which really makes me *feel* the book and want to re-read it and write about it rather than any one of dozens of others.

Another point I wished to make centred upon the subtle way Ann Halam structured her story. On the first occasion in which Maurice reads about Professor Baxter, we see him recoil in embarrassment on discovering the nature of the eminent scientist's "extravagance", but it is his Great-Aunt who articulates that he has been reading "about the fairies". We don't know exactly what Maurice has read, and it is the same when Maurice discovers a volume of the Professor's diary. We as readers only see brief quotations. Maurice knows much more than we do: we "know" only through his reactions. This produces a distancing effect which, to me, is very similar to watching the reaction of a film actor to something which has not yet appeared on the screen. "Cinematic" also implies strong visual stimuli, and, as well as the frequent references to shadows and the presences Maurice sees, or rather half-sees, there is the important element of photography to underlie the "fairy" element of the story. (One of the most-quoted instances of "evidence" for supernatural beings or elementals is the case of the "Cottingley Fairies", photographs taken by two young girls which were vouched for as impossible to fake by various authorities until fairly recently when one of the perpetrators admitted her share in the hoax.) There is a lovely paradox here, however, because the book is only "cinematic" by allusion; we read of Maurice half-seeing things, or of a reference to Maurice reading something which is not shown to us, and the effect is greater because we do not directly experience what the viewpoint character is seeing. In a film version, we would see too much — thus is the power of print and the imagination.

The third major impact of the book is the idea of catharsis. Maurice's self-centredness is healed. His relationship with others is central to the story. His family is living in the Middle East and Maurice is waiting to join them, and his bitterness at being "exiled" (even though he doesn't actually *like* his school) exacerbates the isolation caused by his persistent allergies and asthma. Maurice comes over as an unpleasant, whinging child, snobbish and racist to his Great-Aunt's Home Help (ironically so, as he's fixated on an Asian girl). The references to this were almost entirely cut out of the first draft of the review partly because of the word-count I was working to and partly because of that nemesis of reviewers, a tendency merely to recount the plot. But I left myself trying to understand the changes the climax of the book brings about in Maurice. They seemed to amount to the idea that he is faced with himself and, as he's faced with *fear* through exploiting and disturbing the dead, so he realises that he's only been thinking about what *he* gets out of the living. As Mary, the Home Help, explains: "There was no big secret. Just respect for the dead. But you don't understand about being a friend, and having respect for someone... You going to have to change that." And so I added the phrase about catharsis, "a healing rather than a scarring", on final revision.

There are a couple of minor points which didn't make it into any of the drafts of the review, but which I would mention were I writing an extended piece about the book. They refer to incidents rather than integral parts of the story. One is Maurice's encounter with a skinhead in the cemetery:

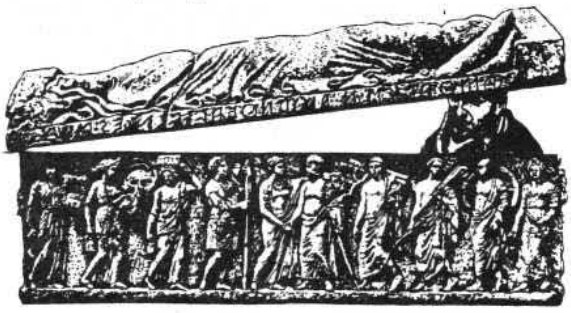
> "Do not attempt to deceive me," said the skinhead. (The expressions he used were less polite.) "Where's your mate? The one that was fooling around (or words to that effect) up in the tree, chucking things."

This is coy, mawkish "children's book" stuff; I would far rather read obscenities in children's books than have this game of implying words that the writer knows that the child reading the book knows and the child knows that their parent or teacher knows, but it's all right because the words aren't actually printed. Having said that, I'd then have, in the present climate of backlash and censorship, greater difficulty in justifying the presence of the book in a children's library, and the effect could just as easily have been obtained by avoiding any hint of forbidden language. The other quibble I have is the naming of a minor character who is otherwise

referred to throughout the story as "the ordinary boy": this is certainly a personal response and I can quite understand that others might feel the device might be as artificial as the aforementioned skinhead's dialogue. Neither criticism really affects my enjoyment of the book and as such was not necessary in the review.

However, one final change *was*, I felt, necessary. In my initial reference to "SF writer Gwyneth Jones" the words "SF writer" did not originally appear. They were inserted, not so much to point out that "Ann Halam" writes SF novels for adults, but to underline the references to the different interpretations of the "ghost story". It could, of course, have been a strictly scientific time-shift tale and nothing to do with the supernatural at all by the end, with everything neatly explained; certainly, *King Death's Garden* could have been SF had the author wanted it so. Quite deliberately, a science fiction novel has not been written.

This sounds all very metaphysical, and it's a cliché of reviewing that reviewers are often lambasted by angry authors for wanting a different book from the one the author actually wrote, and slamming what they *have* written because it's not what they should have written. And yes, in most cases this is simply bad practice. But like many clichés, it has an element of sound common sense in it. (And not just because the "alternative" book could be literate, well-plotted, with believable characters, etc...) Perhaps it's insidious structuralism, but one of the interesting things about books *is* the different ways they could have been written. I've mentioned three (one major, two minor) here but the point is that a good writer will (as here) make their way seem the *right* way. It seemed to me in writing the review that, as I've said, an important part of the story is the tension between the "rational" and "supernatural" interpretations. I've no doubt that a great book could have been written in which Maurice's initial "scientific" view prevails and everything has a neat rational explanation. It wouldn't be *King Death's Garden*, though.



And because I like to think about possibilities, because I like ghost stories, and because I think that the most effective ghost stories are the ones which leave you thinking — and because I think, rightly or wrongly, that *King Death's Garden* has this quality — that's why I wrote the review I did.

There are, of course, other reasons; more fundamental but, perhaps, less relevant. As *Paperback Inferno* editor I have more control over what I review than a "staff" reviewer. There are books I review out of duty and books I review because they particularly interest me. *King Death's Garden* is one of the latter. As a children's librarian I was "professionally" interested: in fact, the copy I read was my library copy. I had attended Gwyneth Jones's Eastercon speech shortly before reading it. I have been a fan of ghost stories for many years. All this disposed me to want to read the book, and to be sympathetic when I read it. Other themes in it attracted me: Maurice's imminent emigration, for one. I spent much of my own childhood abroad and rereading an interview in *Interzone 19* I was reminded that at one point Gwyneth Jones lived in Singapore. True, a couple of decades this side of my time further up the Malayan peninsula, but another slice of identification fell into place.

None of this is relevant to how you, the reader, respond to what I have said about the book. More important ought to be the ideological and critical hardware I bring to my examination. Yet I will skip this, partly because Mike Christie has charted the literary-critical labyrinth (*V144*), but mainly because it was in fact the *personal* rather than the *ideological* contact with the story which seemed important at the time.

It may be significant that I've focussed on the more "structural" aspects of *King Death's Garden* rather than, for example, exploring more fully the moral issues of the author's introduction of a multi-racial school or Maurice's father's choice of work abroad or the dole. Both interest me, but to be successfully discussed in their proper context, need more lengthy explication. My own preferred "critical approach" is probably, in Mike Christie's terms, "post-structuralist". Whatever that means. This is not to say that I don't believe that some political or critical theories are nearer to reality than others. Most approaches are capable of offering insights and ways of looking at a book which, perhaps, make it more readable. Time and again I find myself enjoying a novel when I am out of sympathy with its underlying ideology, discovering a worthwhile point in a work of criticism whose overall view I find incomplete. This may be my own lack of ideological soundness. Who can tell? But no writer worth reading ever expressed a totally uniform ideology in their works and no critic or reviewer worth paying attention to ever praised or blamed solely according to how much the book in question satisfied the demands of social theory. It's because this is fundamental to my approach that I'm not favouring you with a list of my precise differences from 1988 yuppie capitalism. It's not my job as reviewer to give you straightforward simplistic answers. Even when I'm at my most dogmatic, I'm still thrusting questions rather than answers at you. Even when I know I'm right, I may not be.

When reviewing, one doesn't mentally list one's possible critical stances and choose which will be today's flavour... but here, I'm setting a linguistic trap, because rather than being non-existent or unimportant these things are part of the reviewer's nature, used automatically. Nearly 30 years of reading SF and Fantasy as the major but by no means exclusive aspect of an almost obsessive lust for the printed page, and a hefty dose of academic study gives you some knowledge of relationships between modes of writing and some approaches to reading which you find rewarding, whether you like it or not. And I've already slipped a lot of this in, in the original review, and here. I can't help it. Basic literary-critical terms like "catharsis", concentration on the way the text manipulates our expectations as readers (all those questions in the first paragraph: that phrase about "our privileged standpoint as readers") enter into my discourse (there, I've done it again, haven't I?) because I do feel that a piece of writing *must* move the reader and one of the most effective ways of doing this is actually to allow the reader some awareness of how and why this emotion springs up. Few of "Ann Halam"'s readers — the children to whom Puffin aim to sell the book — will be aware or interested in exactly how or why she manipulates the conventions of the ghost story, but I suspect that the *PI* readers who might be interested in the book will have themselves read enough ghost stories to find the signposts in the text of "alternative" approaches part of the pleasure of reading it.

Perhaps all writing is emblematic and figurative, but it is possible to draw up a spectrum of modes with SF/Fantasy at one end and "the realistic novel" at the other. If this is so — and I *know* I'm oversimplifying — it becomes more natural for me to quote supporting instances (as above) from that other great age of emblematic and polemical writing, the 16th and 17th centuries. As I reread, it sounds "academic"; as I *think*, it's as relevant — perhaps more so — as the personal impressions that sparked off my interest in *King Death's Garden*. What is important to the reader of the review is not my biographical reasons for writing, but what I say about the book. What's important to me is the experience and world-view which I bring to bear on the book and the way this is changed by the act of reading. The final paradox about any piece of writing — and this includes a book review as much as an essay or a novel — is that the subjective and the objective are so inextricably linked. Perhaps the Reverend Sydney Smith was correct when he wrote "I never read a book before reviewing it; it prejudices a man so." I quite enjoy dealing with the prejudice.

BOOKS

REVIEWS EDITED BY
Paul Kincaid

REVIEWS

THE NEW GULLIVER - Esmé Dodderidge
[Women's Press, 1988, 247pp, £3.95]
Reviewed by Edward James

LEMUEL GULLIVER *JR* LIVES IN A WORLD which, technologically, corresponds roughly to the early 20th century, although clearly it is not our 20th century. While exploring on the frontiers of civilisation in an airship he crashes and finds himself in a country whose very existence had never been suspected: Capovolta. He is nursed back to health in a Capovoltan household, and gradually learns the horrifying truth: in Capovolta it is the women who are regarded as superior and who are in control. The obvious novelistic comparison is with Gerd Brantenberg's *The Daughters of Egalia* (trans 1985, in paperback as *Egalia's Daughters*). But having the world viewed through an external observer, Gulliver, unlike in Brantenberg's book, is a useful device, and altogether Dodderidge's book (first published 1980) is more subtle, more keenly observed and much wittier.

We follow pompous young Gulliver in his first person narrative (written in reasonable pastiche of his more famous ancestor) through his slow awakening to the fact that he has found himself in a society which routinely oppresses him simply because of his gender. Indeed, all the presuppositions of his own society are turned on their head (as, of course, the word "Capovolta" implies). There is no word in Capovoltan for "henpeck", for instance, as women are naturally dominant; other disparaging adjectives applied only to women (such as "nymphomaniac") are also missing, or have their male equivalents. Because men are naturally physically stronger, they are given those jobs which involve hard manual labour, such as housework; the less physically demanding jobs, such as teaching, scientific research or government, are almost entirely restricted to the naturally more intelligent gender, the women. Gulliver progresses from one misery to another in this appallingly oppressive society, being unable to get a job better than a mere secretary (which he has to give up when his wife has children), and then finding himself deserted by his wife in favour of a younger and more handsome man. He finds comfort only in the friendship of some other equally oppressed husbands - although his chances in Capovolta are improved when his middle-aged boss falls for him.

It is odd how many details make one think about the nature of our own society. Could it be that it is intended as satire?

WISE CHILD - Monica Furlong
[Gollancz, 1987, 224pp, £7.95]
SLAMBASH WANGS OF A COMPO GORMER - Robert Leeson
[Collins, 1987, 288pp, £6.95]
RACHEL AND THE ANGEL - Robert Westall
[Macmillan, 1987, 187pp, £7.50]
GHOSTS AND JOURNEYS - Robert Westall
[Macmillan, 1988, 167pp, £6.95]
Reviewed by Jessica Yates

ON MULL, IN 7TH CENTURY DALRIADA, "Wise Child" is abandoned first by her mother, who chooses a life of lust and sorcery, then her father, a sailor, then her granny dies and she is taken in by Juniper, a wise woman and herbalist. She learns the properties of herbs and how to read and write Latin, but she also has a thrilling ride on a broomstick after being coated with special ointment - or was it all in the mind? Then the village priest arrests Juniper for witchcraft, and Wise Child needs to summon up courage and intelligence to carry out a rescue.

Stylistically the book is impeccable and intellectually it raises important questions: the differing rôles of men and women, altruism vs greed, the persecution of minorities. But the proportion of description to dialogue and the distanced first-person narrative which reduce immediacy, result in a book which fails when judged by the most basic standard: that it should keep its readers turning the page.

It's extraordinary that *Wise Child* made the shortlist for the Carnegie Medal when better fantasies failed. One such is *Slambash Wangs of a Compo Gormer*, a send-up of dungeons and dragons. Arnold thinks he has created the fantasy world of Klaptonia and its nonsense language, Klaptonian. He is wrong. The world already exists, and when political chicanery forces a swop via transfer beam between him and his alter ego Dornal, Arnold has to cope as a hero on Klaptonia, Dornal as a comprehensive schoolboy.

Behind the linguistic joking and fantastic adventure, Leeson's message is much better digested within the text than in *Wise Child*. Both Arnold and Dornal wonder about the morality of killing people, and in the story are successful without having to do this (*pace* the teachers who condemn RPG because they teach that violence is the solution to most problems).

Robert Westall, who also missed the Carnegie shortlist with his excellent *Urn Burial*, has two new collections. *Ghosts and Journeys* is mostly ghost and horror stories, of which "The Borgia Mirror" has an adult appeal: the unfaithful husband of a rich wife buys an antique mirror and disappears into it to keep a tryst with a Borgia beauty. Two days later his body is dumped in the bedroom with a Borgia dagger in his chest, and the wife has to dispose of the body ...

Rachel and the Angel will be more to SF tastes. It includes the original of "Urn Burial", "Peckforton Hill" about computers nurturing the remnants of intelligent life after the holocaust, and the title story about a teenage girl and the Old Testament angel Zaphael. But it's "Artist on Aramor", dropped from the forthcoming paperback edition, that's most intriguing. A painter accepts a commission to paint landscapes of another planet, where the natives are ugly and will keep out of his way. To avoid loneliness he is provided with robots who look like and function as beautiful women. He takes them as lovers, only to find they are controlled by real women who use them to satisfy their curiosity about men, one of whom will now be allowed to choose him as her sex slave.

THE HIDDEN WORLD - Stuart Gordon
[Macdonald, 1988, 352pp, £12.95]
Reviewed by John Newsinger

A COMPLEX, DENSELY WRITTEN NOVEL, THE second in a trilogy, that requires more than the usual amount of effort from the reader. The situation is not helped if, like this reviewer, you haven't read *Archon*, the first volume. Does it repay the effort?

The Hidden World is a story of super beings who have been placed on earth to help uplift humankind before they are annihilated in the Great Shift. These creatures of light succumb to the lusts of the flesh and the world seems doomed. All is not lost, however, because an attempt spanning time is underway to defeat the Beast and reclaim his sister creature, Tiy.

The main protagonists are Sam

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Joyce, a social worker (at last this fine body have their heroism acknowledged!) engaged in a titanic struggle against the Beast in pre-history, and his daughter, Chrissa, marooned among the doomed Cathar heretics in 13th century France. As well as their joint struggle against the Beast, the book gives some clues as to the inner meaning of it all which will, one assumes, be revealed in the last volume.

On the plus side, Gordon produces some gripping prose. The sections among the Cathars always managed to quicken this reader's interest. He writes of the persecution of the Cathars and of their physical and spiritual resistance, with passion and commitment. Unfortunately it is only here, where Gordon has an historical anchor, that the novel really worked.

On the minus side, Sam and Chrissa, are confused, bewildered and lost. And so for much of the time is the reader. Gordon's prose plunges his readers into their tortured, dislocated, fragmented, haunted consciousnesses so that the trials they undergo are "experienced" rather than understood. No amount of intellectual effort can make sense of events; the book unfolds its inner meaning in its own good time. It has a revelatory structure, taking the reader deeper into a religiose mystery with science fiction trappings. A brave literary effort but one that has alas failed.

Gordon has attempted to write a "serious" fantasy novel that is uncompromising in the demands it makes on his readers. Unfortunately he seems to consider that seriousness necessarily excludes any appearance of humour: the book is all grimace and no grin. There are some good moments but *The Hidden World* is only for those with stamina. Gordon takes his irrationalism a bit too seriously for this reader.

OTHER VOICES - Colin Greenland
[Unwin, 1988, 182pp, £11.95]
Reviewed by Paul Brazier

I FOUND SOME OLD SCHOOL REPORTS THE other day. "Lazy. Could do better if he tried," seemed to be the regretful sum of the comments. Now I have begun to understand that tone of disappointment. With *Other Voices* Greenland has disappointed me greatly.

This is not to say that it is a bad book. Far from it. Coming to it cold, having never read anything by this author before, you would leave it wanting more. But coming to it after the first two novels, a failure of imagination becomes apparent. *Daybreak on a Different Mountain* was a fantasy which while flawed promised well for the future. But the author confided that he thought it too ambitious, he had thought he knew the answer to the problems of life. Indeed *The Hour of the Thin Ox* was less ambitious, though in some ways a more sweeping story. Nevertheless it was good science fiction, the very fact of it being a different world was of vital importance to the plot, as the nature of the world took a hand. Now, in *Other Voices*, we return to the same world, and nature again takes a hand in the culmination.

But this time there is no strange and wonderful cause. The entire action could have been set on Earth, where in the previous novel this was not the case. Not, in itself, any great sin. After all, worlds must be essentially similar to ours for us to understand them. But the same failure of imagination is also evinced in the cast of characters. We have a couple imported from the previous novel, some wild hill-dwelling romanys and, of all things, a vampire. The reach of the novel, too, is smaller. In *The Hour of the Thin Ox* we saw the conflict of two cultures, where both were portrayed. Here, we have the occupation of a small mountain town and the consequent problems caused by the romanys.

All these criticisms spring from comparing this novel with its predecessors. Taken alone, it is a well-written, well-plotted believable journeyman work. I recommend it wholeheartedly as a good book which even repays a second reading (it is good to see Unwin Hyman binding books properly again, too). Greenland draws characters sympathetically and believably, and has them do believable things, suffer believably. He even creates a credible vampire. My only complaint is that the book is under-achieved.

I am led to wonder if we might not expect the completion of the trilogy next year. Certainly I am in favour of thin trilogies, as this would undoubtedly be. I just hope that in attempting to round up all the loose ends and bring to fruition the strands of plot still dangling from two books, the author will actually fulfil that which he has so far only promised.

FORTUNE OF FEAR - L.Ron Hubbard (360pp)
DEATH QUEST - L.Ron Hubbard (351pp)
[New Era, 1987, £10.95 each]
Reviewed by Debby Moir

YET ANOTHER TWO VOLUMES IN THE MISSion Earth Dekalogy. I guess the best thing that could be said of them is that there are only four more volumes to go. Much as I enjoy Space Opera, especially if used as a vehicle for satire, I am beginning to find this series does go on rather. The sheer inertia of starting yet another volume is rather a drawback, especially as there is so much to remember of what has gone before, none of it particularly memorable.

Okay, I found both volumes a fun read once I got started, I didn't need to think much while reading them, a nice change after a day at the office. They are really just pure escapism, with a sprinkling of satirical comment on "the American Way" thrown in for good measure. Although unfortunately some themes are beginning to recur with monotonous regularity: big business, gangsters, the greedy clutches of the credit card companies, the inland revenue, to name but a few.

There is also an increasingly morbid fascination with the seamier side of sex. All the old chauvinistic chestnuts are raked over the coals: women really want to be raped; lesbians are poor misguided souls who don't know any better and are just waiting for a man (no matter how unsavory) to come along and show them the error of their ways, by force if necessary. I don't consider myself particularly pro women's lib, but I did find the attitudes here strongly chauvinistic and reminiscent of the Gor books. I feel this was carrying the precepts of satire a bit too far.

As with the earlier volumes, the characters are larger than life. Soltan Gris, the supposed narrator (as translated by the Robobrain in the Translataphone, 54 Charlee Nine) is the archetypal dumb gangster boss, only outdone in stupidity by his minions. Hettero Heller, the "all American" alien hero, who always seems to end up falling on his feet through blind chance - when (or if) he ever grows up he will have to retire from the hero business and become an absent minded professor. The Countess Krak, supposedly as deadly as she is beautiful, but apparently without an ounce of common sense. In fact it's a wonder that anyone could believe that aliens could be a threat to mankind if they are all like this.

If you are looking for escapism and don't mind the chauvinism and rather excessive length then these books are probably worth a try.

REIGN OF FIRE - Marjorie Bradley Kellogg with William B. Rossow
[Gollancz, 1988, 382pp, £11.95]
Reviewed by Chris Barker

THIS IS THE SECOND, CONCLUDING PART TO *Lear's Daughters*, begun with *The Wave and the Flame*. It is best seen as a scientific detective story with metaphysical overtones. The source of the mystery is the bizarre, unexpected weather patterns on the planet Fiix, and how far the native Sawl population is correct in attributing the extremes in weather to the battle between rival goddesses, Lagri and Valla. Marooned on the planet, the small team of scientists seeks to solve this perplexing dilemma as they begin to share their lives with the Sawls.

The bare bones wouldn't be out of place in an SF magazine of the 1950s. Since then, however, we have had the emergence of writers like LeGuin, whose emphasis on the softer sciences and the development of real characters

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forms the creative backwash to this two-part novel. Both hard and soft sciences are well portrayed here, bearing fruit from Kellogg's collaboration with Rossow, a NASA scientist specialising in planetary atmospheres.

On reading *The Reign of Fire* I was struck afresh with the similarity between this novel and Mary Gentle's *Golden Witchbreed*. The latter has less emphasis on the hard science aspects of the exploration of an ancient alien civilisation; and the intent of the books is discernibly different, Kellogg's is, in essence, very well done SF mystery. But it would be easy to overlook the thorough exploration of the Sawls' culture and the gods who give the overall title to the work. Without giving too much away, the resolution of the puzzle is not simply a scientific rationalisation at the complete expense of, say, the "religious" experience which marked the conclusion of the first book. Gentle's intent isn't so much a resolution of a specific mystery as an exploration both physically and metaphysically of an alien world where the ending does not require a specific answer. The problem Kellogg and Rossow face reflects the fact that they build up to an ultimate revelation of the mystery they have proposed, with the inherent danger of producing an anti-climax. Fortunately, due to the skill of the writing and the development of good characters who are enmeshed in the mystery, the ending does not pall.

CLOUDROCK — Garry Kilworth
[Unwin Hyman, 1988, 160pp, £11.95]
Reviewed by Paul Kincaid & David V Barrett

CLOUDROCK WAS ORIGINALLY WRITTEN while Kilworth was at University, though it has been extensively revised for this first appearance in print. There is no question that this is the scouring of waste-paper baskets and bottom drawers that some writers indulge in when running short of inspiration, this is a mature, effective work with some scenes that are as vivid and as perceptive as anything else Kilworth has done. Nevertheless there are also signs of youth about the book, and while these contribute to its freshness and vigour, they also make for some of its weaker moments.

It is, I suspect, the younger Kilworth, for instance, who felt he had to describe and explain his creation from every possible angle and at sometimes excessive length. One of the lessons an experienced writer learns is just how much or how little needs to be said to set the reader's imagination working, and in his short fiction Kilworth has demonstrated time and again that he has learned this lesson very well. By the same token, I think we can also lay the blame for the narrator's long and often repetitive introspections at the feet of the youthful author.

Perhaps the older Kilworth might have edited some of these longeurs to worthwhile effect, but what he has done is take the freshness and daring of youthful invention and mould it into a mature work that grips and excites. The novel overflows with invention: the tiny circumscribed world of Cloudrock itself, a mushroom-shaped rock rising out of the deadlands. The two Families that occupy the rock, the daytime hunters and the nighttime hunters, and the narrow, ritualised, matriarchal societies they have created. The literal casting out of the unwanted, deformed offspring of their institutionalised in-breeding, and the shadowy existence of the deformed narrator, who escapes death only as long as nobody acknowledges his existence. And the unrealised community of the unwanted who survive at the foot of Cloudrock. All of these provoke a powerful sense of wonder in the reader, and they work in the novel because the mature writer has given them a solid, realistic grounding. Each invention is balanced with the detail that tells us how such a world, such a society functions, and where it falters. Kilworth has made the personalities of Shadow, Clay, Yellowbark and the others deep and clear enough for us to know that this isn't a one-dimensional "good idea", but a solidly worked-out world.

And if the plot that takes us from the Romeo and Juliet romance between Clay and Tilana, to the flight through the heart of the rock to the unknown world below, to the incipient war between the cultures and the eventual need to work together for the greater good, seems to run on rather too predictable lines; and if the pace sometimes falters in the face of too much exposition or introspection; then the invention never flags, and Kilworth makes it all eminently readable.

[PK]

I WAS AT FIRST ASTONISHED WHEN I learnt that *Cloudrock* was an early unpublished novel, now revised and rewritten. I'd been going to say that Garry Kilworth had at last written a novel as good as his short stories. He has long been a master of the short story form, but his novels have somehow just missed being of the same standard. They've had good ideas, plots, characters, writing, but *something* was missing, the same indefinable something that made his short stories so good. This novel has it.

Cloudrock is a mushroom-shaped mountain, a plateau atop a pillar. Two tribes coexist on the same land; one hunts by day, the other by night. They acknowledge each other's existence, but otherwise ignore each other uneasily; there is no social interaction.

With the smallness of each society, inbreeding is to be expected; a necessity is made a virtue, and a son marrying his sister or mother is seen as keeping the blood pure. Genetically malformed babies are flung off the edge of the rock. The tribes, like all primitive societies, are rich with taboos and rituals, including the eating of the flesh of those who die.

This in itself is the basis for a good novel, but a complete extra dimension is added: the whole story is told by the Shadow, born malformed but not killed. He may live so long as no-one acknowledges his existence; he attaches himself as a silent shadow to his brother, who can only show his affection by continuing to ignore him. Fictionally and anthropologically this is a brilliant device: the Shadow is *with* the society, but not *of* it, and so can describe it and comment on it with the understanding of a member and the objectivity of an outside observer. (Eat your heart out, Margaret Mead!)

To outline the plot would be to spoil a good story; suffice to say that although some developments are expected, many others are not. But it is the characters and the examination of a primitive society which make this such an excellent book — and on reflection it makes sense that this is a rewriting of an early work: like some of Kilworth's early novels this is an anthropological creation and study, to which he has now been able to bring his experience and developed skill as a writer.

[DVB]

THE HAMMER OF THE SUN - Michael Scott Rohan
[Macdonald, 1988, 502pp, £11.95]
Reviewed by Valerie Housden

ELOF THE MASTERSMITH HAS LIVED HAPPily with Kara for seven years, but fearing that he may lose her, he utilises all his craft to make silver anklets that will bind her to him. At this the sensible girl ups and leaves him. So he sets sail with his old friend Roc, on a Quest to find her, which takes in icebergs and Ekwesh not to mention betrayal in the ancient, corrupt kingdom of Kerys, and culminates in the final confrontation with the dark forces of the Ice.

As with the previous books the first few pages of this novel, the third and hopefully final volume in *The Winter of the World* saga, seems stilted until the reader becomes accustomed to Rohan's lofty style. Then after some aerial sex and yet another detailed description of a forging, the story finally gets going, pausing only for obvious padding at suitable opportunities such as the sailing boat chase through the ice floes.

The strands of plot established in the earlier volumes are satisfactorily, and not always predictably, tied

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together, although Elof's identity has been obvious from the start. However, I spent much of the book pondering the relevance of the title — the hammer is eventually linked in, but only just. The established characters are convincingly sustained, and the new characters are believable — Kerys has a particularly nasty king, for example. The final battle between the forces of the Ice and the combined armies of Kerys and Morvanhal is an effective climax to the trilogy. The consequences of the action are also fully considered.

There are still more appendices, providing new information concerning various aspects of the land and society of Kerys, the Duergar, the Ekwash, local flora and fauna etc., plus maps and diagrams. Although all very interesting and amusing, I find it unnecessary and wish writers would keep their background research to themselves. Tolkien has a lot to answer for.

If you have already read *The Anvil of Ice* and *The Forge in the Forest* then you will probably enjoy this. For afficionados only.

LIFE DURING WARTIME - Lucius Shepard
[Grafton, 1988, 383pp, £10.95]
Reviewed by Maureen Porter & David Hodson

LIFE DURING WARTIME IS NOT A NOVEL within the tightest definition of the term, but rather a linked series of stories, commencing with "R&R", which so inexplicably failed to win a Hugo in 1987. It is about war, a war which might so easily happen in the not-too-distant future given the current political state of Central America. But as the title suggests, the war is really only a backdrop, and the stories chart the philosophical development of David Mingolla, as he progresses from average soldier to Psicorps, and is sent to hunt an agent of the enemy, the girl he has fallen in love with. It sounds so trite, so clichéd, and yet I doubt one will ever again encounter a character with the depth and richness of Mingolla. His anger and frustration as he comes to understand the nature of the war he is fighting is so well-drawn, so powerful, the reader cannot help but be drawn into his plight as he tries to do what he feels is best, torn by loyalty, love and his own sense of justice. The journey he and Debora make, to run away from the war, only leads them into its heart. And the terrible reasons for its existence beautifully illustrate the stupidity inherent in war. Shepard does not apologise for war, nor glorify it. Analogies will obviously be drawn with Vietnam, but this novel is far beyond a simple coming to terms with a war fought twenty years ago.

But *Life During Wartime*, for all its futuristic trappings, is not science fiction. Instead, it is a rich and exotic fantasy which owes more than a little to the magic realist school. Magic and science move hand in hand. Soldiers place their faith in rituals and omens, in telepathy and "feeling". Shepard writes a lush, descriptive prose, very much in keeping with his setting, but always avoids going too far. His use of imagery is startling at times, but never less than effective. However, plotting is a little unsteady, "R&R" and "Fire Zone Emerald" being the strongest sections, and his handling of ambiguity, effective in both these sections, comes unstuck in others, when more information would have benefited the reader in grasping the reasons for the war. This novel may be a flawed masterpiece, but it is the sort of flaw which adds lustre to the stone. [MSP]

A FEW YEARS AGO *NEUROMANCER* WON THE Nebula, Hugo and Philip K. Dick Awards and was hailed as the freshest thing to hit the SF field in years. It was one of the modern Ace Specials edited by Terry Carr, and in all the furore the Ace Special issued immediately before *Neuromancer* missed a lot of the attention it would have got in any other year. *Green Eyes* had very good reviews and most reviewers agreed that the author, Lucius Shepard, was a talent to watch; but while Gibson became a media star as opposed to a promising author, Shepard quietly churned out an amazing body of short fiction and slowly brought his abilities under full control.

Now comes Shepard's second novel, *Life During Wartime* which, I heartily predict, will challenge for many mainstream fiction awards as well as cleaning up just about every SF award in existence. *Life During Wartime* is that once in a decade, if you're lucky, book that becomes an instant classic and influences fiction for years after.

For the first time in years a book that forced me to get so emotionally involved with the characters, settings and circumstances that I unconsciously slowed down reading it just to prolong the relationship. And this after reading two sections of the novel in magazines and having a expectation of the power of the book to come. Nobody could have predicted the *tour de force*; nobody could have foreseen the talent that was to develop from that body of short fiction.

But let's not get too carried away. Shepard still has a lot to learn; his scenarios are starting to become a little repetitive, and the theme of extraordinary man forged by events loses its effect when used in such juddering fashion. Shepard constantly seems to be saying that we can't trust ourselves to use the new miracles of science to the best of our abilities or judgement, but the way in which he mixes various ethnic cultures with new technologies and allows them to co-exist ever more easily and peacefully seems to contradict this view. The main element missing from Shepard's work is any centre ground on which his conscious and subconscious views can meet, work, and come to peace, but it's something that can't help but develop in such a talented author and this is only his second novel.

Mingolla is a grunt in the middle of the constant round of wars in Central America caused by US economic and political interference, or so it seems. Both sides have been experimenting in the use of drugs to maximise the fighting efficiency of their forces. Mingolla meets a psi agent from the enemy, falls in love with her, and discovers his own abilities in this area, but can't make himself desert. He enrols in the US Psicorps, is trained and drugged, and sent to search and destroy the woman he loves. From here the book turns into a sort of deserter's eye view of a more realistic, but equally complex and fantastic, illuminati style conspiracy.

Shepard gives us a reason for the petty conflicts that have been taking place around the world for decades, which, despite sounding crazier than the actual existence of the conflicts, makes perfect logic within the framework of the novel.

All that having been said, *Life During Wartime* is basically a love story which examines why people who have nothing, or very little, in common come to forge the bonds they do, and why those bonds seem to flourish in times of adversity.

Shepard will undoubtedly become one of the very finest writers that the SF field has ever produced, but I don't think we'll see the best of him for quite a few novels yet. Even then, I'm not entirely sure that he'll be dealing with concerns that British SF readers will be completely able to sympathise with.

NORSTRILIA - Cordwainer Smith
[Gollancz, 1988, 275pp, £10.95 hardback, £2.95 paperback]
Reviewed by L.J. Hurst

THIS BOOK HAS NEVER BEEN PUBLISHED IN its entirety in Britain before, though a dissected version appeared in two volumes as *The Planet Buyer* and *The Underpeople*. Gollancz's publicity has announced that it is being issued in their Classic SF series but the cover makes no mention of this. The table of contents lists a biographical page of detail which, when you turn to it, is devoid of content, lacking even a page number. The biographical detail appears on the back of the dustjacket.

Norstrilia is one of those books more heard of than seen. I was pleased to receive it for review because I'd

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never seen it in any of its forms, yet everywhere Cordwainer Smith is hailed as an important author. This edition comes with a quotation from David Pringle's *Science Fiction: The Hundred Best Novels*, which tends to agree with the other three sources I've consulted — "Vividly drawn and wonderfully suggestive ... confirms that Cordwainer Smith was one of science fiction's most original writers". Re-reading the entry on *Norstrilia* in Pringle's book I notice that one of the details he gives about the story (the legality of the hero's computer) is wrong, and I tend to think that his believe in Smith's originality is also wrong.

Most of Smith's fiction is set in a common future — Gollancz say they are going to publish his other three collections of short stories, so the Future History and its worlds will become clear, although the main events and some of the main characters are all in this novel. It's a vast expanded universe of linked worlds, joined by trade but split by trade wars over, for instance, the longevity drug Stroon, main product of the planet Norstrilia which is ruled by a hereditary nobility, and all tending to decadence — this is the general background. In the particular instance of *Norstrilia*, a young man on an off-world comes to manhood by becoming a millionaire and a prosthetic ESPer at the same time. He also comes into contact with the Underpeople, animals reshaped into humans to act as disenfranchised servants, whose struggle for enfranchisement is said to be one of the themes of Smith's work. The use of animals, Pringle points out, is reminiscent of Wells' Dr Moreau, but he doesn't point out that the whole style of *Norstrilia* is very close to Alfred Bester's *The Stars My Destination*, but neither do any of the other critics I've consulted. Yet re-reading Bester directly after to double-check, I'm sure that the two works are similar. A bizarre satire is something they have in common - Stroon comes from 1000 ton mutated sheep.

I welcome the publication of this book, while offering my (perhaps idiosyncratic) opinion that it is not as original as it is sometimes claimed to be, but for those who would like to discover another Future History, or for those who like a slightly megalomaniac style, the appearance of Smith's work could be a potentially wonderful mine of reading.

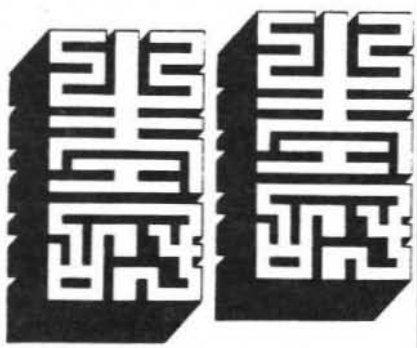
THE AWAKENERS - Sheri S. Tepper
[Bantam, 1988, 476pp, £12.95]
Reviewed by Sue Thomason

THIS IS A NOVEL ABOUT AN IMMORAL RELigion, founded upon an immoral ecosystem.

It's also one of those books which launch the unprepared reader into a strange and interesting place full of strange, interesting people doing strange, interesting things - and because "plot" and "explanation" are tightly interwoven, and because *everything* in an ecosystem is dependent on everything else, I can't tell you much more about it than that. I can say that the book concerns the interaction of humans and intelligent non-humans on a world with two polar continents separated by a World River (or World Ocean). Northshore is the known land, Southshore a rumour or legend. Movement on Northshore is restricted; townspeople may travel within their own (fenced) town lands, and may move westwards around Northshore on pilgrimage, following the direction of sun, moons and tide, but movement east is anti-life and forbidden. Trade also moves west, carried almost exclusively by boat.

The Awakeners of the title are a human religious and theocratic civil service: they dress in black, live in towers (one to every township), supervise the worship of Potipur, Viranel and Abricor. They also control the undead Workers by dosing them with "the Tears of Viranel". What the Awakeners really do, and why, is the key to understanding the way Northshore works.

Despite initial impressions, this is *not* a fantasy, though it does contain a good deal of religious speculation. It does not depend on magic or the supernatural (though it does contain wingmen and walking dead), neither does it make any overt use of "hard science". It's a book about the shaping of a society's beliefs and attitudes by landscape and ecology; what at first seems outrageous is shown to be logical, even necessary, given the ecological niche into which the human society must fit itself. In fact in many ways the themes of *The Awakeners* are the themes of *Dune*. Landscape, ecology, planetary religious uprising ... I thoroughly enjoyed the book, and recommend it highly as an absorbing puzzle-story and a thoughtful, dramatic, well-told tale.



THE SYKAOS PAPERS - E.P. Thompson
[Bloomsbury, 1988, 482pp, £13.95]
Reviewed by Gwyneth Jones

THE PURPOSES OF SATIRE AND SF ARE closely linked: it would be hard to find any SF completely innocent of a secret agenda. It must seem churlish then when genre writers grumble and sneer at those from the wider stage of politics or philosophy who hijack SF for their own high purposes. But however apologetically, I have to maintain that E.P. Thompson's *The Sykaos Papers* is yet another example of a failed expedition, a doomed project that founders in misapprehension and amateurish over confidence.

An alien poet arrives on Earth, crashing his shuttle beside an English motorway. His name is Oi Pas, from the planet Oitar. The reader who deciphers this simple code will learn that we are being inspected by Wisdom, whose home is Reason. There are no surprises in the treatment this wandering innocent receives, in his whimsical and trenchant judgements on our "Sykotic" ways; nor in his fate when the Powers That Be are eventually convinced that they are dealing with a genuine alien. The greater part of the book concerns Oi Pas's prolonged debriefing, in the kind of establishment (a very stately English home and grounds) familiar to all admirers of 60s TV fantasy. Meanwhile, America and Russia (just these two and their impotent "allies", Japan, for instance, doesn't exist) deal with the shocking reality of approaching alien invasion. There are no surprises here either, and the end of the story (aside from a code which is too embarrassing to mention) is predictable.

In genre terms, this is an astonishing farrago of atrociously corny ideas, from the dyspeptic word processor which apparently vomited the text into Thompson's lap "by timewarp", to the hints at former visitations from certain legendary Oitarians, Droo Id, Kris Na and Bod Ha. It's also presented - a time-honoured device - as if it isn't really "fiction" at all. The resultant scrapbook of committee minutes (in all their authentic horror), "diary entries", "scientific notes", news cuttings, may satisfy some authorial need to make the utterly bizarre idea of an alien invasion presentable. But the effect is hardly reader-friendly. There is some serious science-fictional work in the debriefing: a detailed and fairly rigorous attempt to depict the progress of a relationship between Earthling anthropologist and alien being. But sadly the scientist (a girl-anthropologist, of course) eventually has to take on a most unprofessional rôle: with some tender pelvic-thrusting dialogue in the style of Captain Kirk. And I hardly like to mention the instantaneous speed at which anthropologist vanishes into wife-and-mother, post-seduction ...

None of which matters very much: this is not, one realises, intended to be interesting or original SF. However it must be intended to be effective propaganda, but it is here that *Sykaos* goes desperately wrong. We learn that in the face of utter disaster the heavy dancers will see us all dead and

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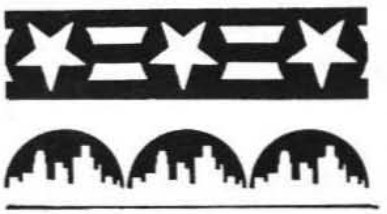
damned before they give up their hideous posturing. All very well, though hardly a new insight; but the problem is that Reason reversed is no benign Utopia. Oitar is a machine society run by computers, a culture with no equivalent terms for "love", "mercy", "compassion". Moreover the world of these programmed beings is dying: they have not come in peace, they are looking for *lebensraum*. And in spite of some later fudging it is quite clear that when the Oitarians move in, the Earth will be about as healthy for Earthlings as present day Australia is for native Australians. To be fair, Thompson does have a satirical rationale for making the invaders hostile. In the Oitar culture, he wishes to lampoon and condemn the machine driven, "emotionless" excesses which are, he believes, to blame for the present dangerous state of *this* world. Unfortunately the net result of this thrifty conflation is that Thompson finds himself telling us that the paranoia merchants are right. The Other *is* deadly dangerous. They *will* step on us as if we were bugs.

How did E.P. Thompson, tireless campaigner for a positive future and a habitable planet, get himself into this illogical bind? It is extraordinary in the work of a peace activist to find that the only mention of grass-roots political action is a brief contemptuous dismissal of some ill-informed "Greenham Women". Otherwise the people are silent. We, the readers, are given no alternative but to identify with those "in the know", the officer corps, and join the writer in hopeless mourning for the beloved England of horses and cats, roses and lilies, loyal servants, gracious ladies and decent, intelligent, blue-eyed army officers.

Is this an insider's bitter and despairing dismissal of the peace movement and, by inference, the human race? I think not, for there is after all that coda, and he treats his "last days" characters, sentimental puppets though they are, with real affection. *The Sykaos Papers* is a three-hankie daydream, which would never have strayed into print in any serious guise. What we have here is the nostalgia of a generation which, because it has no other youth, cannot do other than dream of the cameraderie, the courage, the clarity of total war; and above all the emotional luxury of a unifying enemy (cf "The Lucky Strike", K.S. Robinson). I suspect Thompson is well aware of this effect. I suspect he feels he paid for the self-indulgence by giving his tale a down-beat ending, and that the bad logic, for all serious purposes, thus forced on his first contact scenario doesn't matter because this is "only science fiction". But it does matter. The future has no existence but in our imaginations: and so imaginary surrender is uncomfortably close to the real life kind.

[A shorter version of this review appeared in *The New Statesman*, week ending 3 June 1988]



JACKAROO - Cynthia Voigt
[Collins, 1988, 284pp, £4.95]
Reviewed by Maureen Porter

CYNTHIA VOIGT HAS GARNERED A CONSIDerable reputation as a writer of fiction for teenagers, and has now turned her hand to fantasy with *Jackaroo*.

It's a slow-moving tale, much time being devoted to describing the feudal society in which Gwyn, the heroine, lives. The common people lead a hard life, reliant on the grudging bounty of the Lords, at the mercy of the Stewards who organised the distribution of food. It's a cruel world, and life comes very cheap. In their discontent, the people talk about Jackaroo, an old-time outlaw who helped the destitute. Gwyn is a practical girl with no time for tales, but she is also thoughtful and comes to appreciate the divisions between the people and the Lords. After being forced to take refuge for the winter in a cottage with a Lord's son, she comes to realise that they are not unlike herself, but she also finds a bundle of clothes, and a sword. Her indignation eventually causes her to assume the role of Jackaroo, to redress the injustice, only to find she is not the only person assuming that identity.

Voigt paints a strong and vivid picture of a land in turmoil, and uses this to mirror Gwyn's inner turmoil as she strives to accept the role which society has allotted her, but which she is unwilling to take on. The laws demand that she either marry or declare her wish to remain unwed, that her brother take on ownership of the inn after her father's death, although it is she who would run it. The only way to live as she wishes is through rejection by her own society.

I have to admit that my first reading of this novel left me unimpressed, but it's like a bomb on a slow fuse. I couldn't stop thinking about it, and a second reading proved that it is a fine novel, a well rounded fantasy, and a telling comment on the predicament of young women in a restrictive culture.

AMBIENT - Jack Womack
[Unwin, 1988, 259pp, £10.95]
Reviewed by Mandy Gunning

THERE IS A SONG WHICH APPEALS TO MY Texan ears: "Send me to Hell or New York City, it'd be 'bout the same to me". Womack, a native of Kentucky, reflects the same sentiments in his first novel, set in a future New York ruled by a post-industrial overclass with the right to do anything, but anything, to the plebs. The rich-raff pay the few employed — the army — to make sure the evil is done on a grand scale. The underclass is just as brutal, making New York the grotesque urban wet dream that Ma and Pa have always known it to be.

The story is told by Seamus, a crackerjack rent-a-pig, in a mixture of bastard English and tortured Spanish. The torture is for the poor reader, however, who, just as she thinks she's getting the hang of Spanglish, is jarringly confronted with more normal speech. Or worse yet, stumbles across the definition of a word she failed to decode 30 pages earlier.

But there is method in the author's madness: the shifting styles of speech indicate social strata, and the different spheres Seamus must move in to do his nasty job. In the opening scenes he is tearing down mean streets in a fast car, slicing up anyone the boss doesn't like. The plot is simpler than the language and about as refreshing as a TV chase scene. Seamus is a henchman with a heart. He's got a bad case of love/lust for Avalon, a *macha hombresse* (my Spanglish for butch girl) in the sado-erotic gear that her sideline as murderous roller derby queen demands. What a surprise that she instantly turns out to be as soppy for Seamus as he is for her. From here the plot keeps to its Post-it sized dimensions as boy gets girl, loses girl, and gets girl again while making obvious down-stage asides that explain Womack's vision of New York.

I don't mind characters lusting after each other but this looks like gratuitous sentimentality. The head-busting tart with a heart is just plain old Bonnie — this time starring with a gun-weary cyber-Clyde. The masculine chick is the fantasy girl of the new masculine chic.

Some readers will like Womack's burlesque vision of a future America where the often extolled virtues of a laissez-faire economy are the source of unrelieved depravity. Those who like whacko sub-cults will admire the Ambients, a marginal but thriving bunch of cyber-nerds hacking at limbs and other dangly bits in a disco-style carnivorium.

But again sentimentality strikes. The Ambients are quite nice — kind of spiritual, really — and are on the verge of ushering in an androgynous Godhead to redeem the earth. The hero's ambient sister loves her kid brother but daren't hug him for the nails in her neck. If authors who apply more and more arcane touches to Hollywood formulae appeal to you, then *Ambient*'s lack of developed characters and omission of a plot will not distract you.

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