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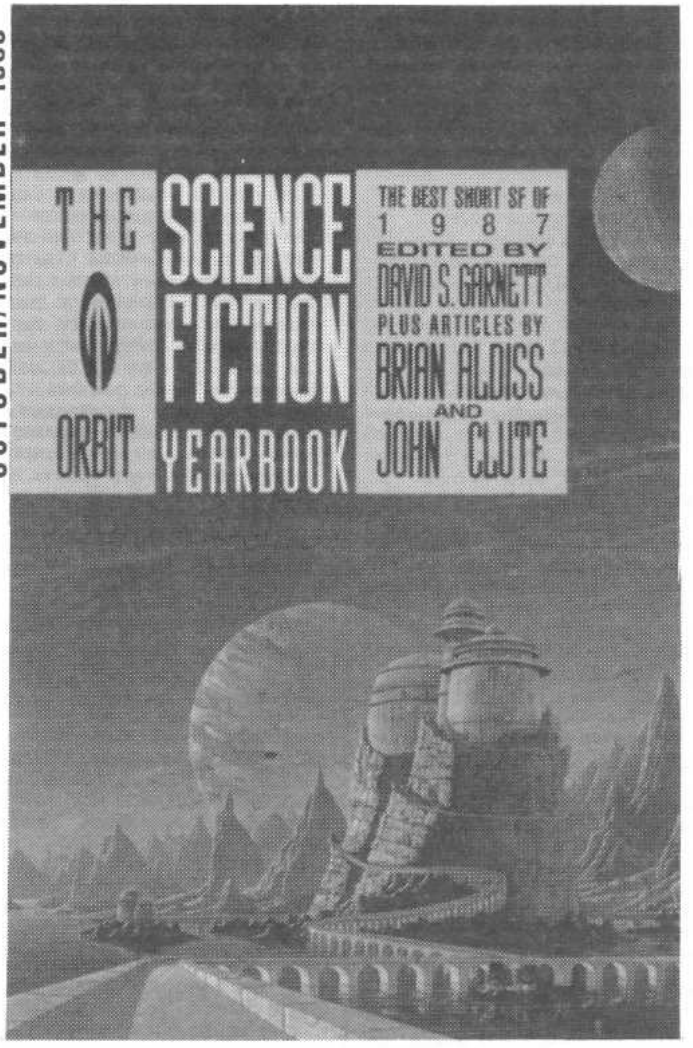
VECTOR

95p

The critical journal of the British Science Fiction Association

OCTOBER/NOVEMBER 1988



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OCTOBER/NOVEMBER 1988

C O N T E N T S

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Cover: Thanks to Orbit Books/MacDonald Futura
Artwork on p 7: Sami Toivonen
Photos on pp 10, 14, 15: DVB

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

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

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EDITORIAL

DAVID V BARRETT

YOU CAN'T GET AWAY FROM SCIENCE FICTION AND FANTASY these days. Not that most of us would want to — but we might sometimes want the choice. But journalists, politicians, the person next to you in the pub, all are likely to refer to things in science fictional terms, or use SF and Fantasy tropes in their news stories, speeches and conversations. Whatever the public acceptance or respectability of the genre, it can't be doubted that SF and Fantasy ideas have infiltrated the public mind.

Look at advertising. The Cadbury's Smash robots have been around for years, but it's hardly possible now to have commercial TV on for an hour without an SF-influenced ad. One of the most effective, and for me troubling, is the British Telecom advert which pulls back from a man making a phone call, to show his office block, the street, the city, country, continent, until the whole spinning world is displayed; then zooms back down to a different continent, country, city, street, office and a ringing telephone. The effects in this piece of film are far more realistic than in any SF film showing starships taking off, flying or docking. The world may be very large, it says, but we, BT, can span it.

It's okay to say this in fiction, in stories and books and films and comics, but to make it *real* disturbs me; it screams *Hubris!* at me; it frightens me with its potentialities.

For many SF fans of the 50s and 60s, I've read, the gloss went off their enthusiasm for the genre when *Sputnik 1* was launched in October 1957, or when Gagarin first orbited the Earth in April 1961, or when Armstrong first set foot upon the Moon in July 1969. Their fictional dream had been tarnished by the cold grubbiness of reality. When I saw, a few years ago, in the National Air and Space Museum in Washington DC, an actual Gemini space capsule, and saw how two men had travelled into space in a container little bigger than a dustbin, and just as tacky, I lost something. When I *touched* a little piece of moon rock, I could not analyse my emotions. (I wrote about this at the time, in *Matrix 48*; I'm no clearer now.)

In my imagination I often find myself back in the past: in the Renaissance or the Middle Ages or the Dark Ages, conversing with scholars and monks and kings, meeting John Dee or Roger Bacon or Arthur. How will I survive? I must learn languages as different from 20th century English as is German or Latin; or, if I can pass myself off as an educated man, Latin or Norman French. What will I miss from today? My glasses, definitely; electricity; everyday cleanliness; much else besides. Leaving aside the morality of interfering in the past, could I design and build an electrical generator, a steam engine, a flush toilet, soap? How would I cope with a sword?

A variant on this dream is that I am a pioneer, perhaps crash-landed, on another planet; how do I even begin to create the comforts of civilisation I will want? How do I set about making pottery, or paper? Or tools like saws and chisels? Quite honestly, I wouldn't have a clue, despite a good education and a lifetime of reading SF.

For the SF or Fantasy reader, these are old ideas, well-trodden by hundreds of writers over the decades. But so was space travel until less than 30 years ago. The imagination is a wonderful (and safe) way to travel. Tell that to Christa McAuliffe, the American school teacher who died in the *Challenger* disaster, killed by administrative and engineering bungling and cockups.

Nuclear power station disasters are old hat in SF; Chernobyl shocked the world rigid. Nuclear weapon holocausts are even more familiar to us; I'm waiting for reality to catch up. SF writers and readers know all about the greenhouse effect in fiction; I've been worried, at a safe distance, for my potential grandchildren. Now the scientists tell us it's already started; it's here; it's with us. Now. Not in the possible-future. Now.

How would I, or you, feel if beings from another world actually contacted us? We've been reading about it for decades; many of us have written about it. But the *reality* of it? How would we react? How would we cope?

We're supposed to be the ones who, because of our reading matter, because of the sort of people we are which causes us to read what we do, because we've *read* all the possible scenarios, are supposed to be ready for it whenever it (whatever *it* might be) comes. In Larry Niven's fairly dreadful *Footfall*, a thinktank of SF writers is brought together to come up with ideas on how to cope with the impending catastrophe. Niven's not the only SF writer to suggest that we are in a special position because of what we read and write, because we've thought it all through in advance.

But are we really?

I read recently that SF readers, proportionally, are far more sceptical of such unexplained or paranormal phenomena as UFOs, ESP and magic than the remainder of the population. (I didn't see any socio-economic-intellectual analysis; the decisive criterion might actually not be *because* we are SF readers, but some other reason. If anybody has such figures, I'd be interested to see them.) Is this because having suspended our disbelief to accept them in fiction, we now can't accept them in fact? Is it because we've thought them through more than your average Joe, and see fallacies in them? Is it because we're more naturally sceptical, or intellectual, or what?

(Having said that, there is a link between SF and Fantasy readers and an interest in the esoteric. Of course, writers in the genre have long explored such subjects, and not always just as a good story. Books like John Crowley's *Ægypt* show a real interest, study and understanding of hermetic philosophy.)

But to come back to "hard" SF. If the aliens arrive, would *you* want Larry Niven or Jerry Pournelle or Isaac Asimov or Arthur C Clarke to be on the welcoming committee? Well, it would be a nice recognition of our genre, but are these the people you would choose as our ambassadors to outer space? Why? Or why not? My own feeling is that I perceive a tendency for "hard" SF writers to be more right-wing than I'm happy with; the "shoot-first-ask-questions-later" mentality; the "For-God's-sake-*nuke*-the-bastards" knee-jerk reaction common in Reaganite America. (When the USSR shot down the Korean airliner a few years back I was working with USAF personnel. Several of them seriously and honestly and vociferously believed that the US response should be to nuke Moscow in immediate retaliation. Some of these people go on to become senior Presidential advisors...)

In fact, SF experts *have* been brought into American military politics. Many fans are into role-playing games, and one of the earliest RPGs, long before S&S fiction and long before computers, was war gaming. In the Pentagon, war games are taken very seriously; senior staff play Russians and Americans with make-believe missiles. In 1980 James Dunnigan, president of RPG company Simulations Publications, Inc, which produces amongst many others *Dragonslayer*, *Swords and Sorcery* and *War of the Ring*, was called into the Pentagon to advise them

> "on how to keep a nuclear war going after a limited exchange. The subject did not bother Dunnigan. 'I've been dealing with that — I've been blowing up the world — for years. What bothered me was that we — *SPI* — were called in at the last minute.'"
>
> (*War Games*, Thomas B Allen, Heinemann, 1987).

Still in the same area, the Strategic Defence Initiative was immediately dubbed "Star Wars"; it really is

pulp SF of the worst sort. As Richard Ennals says in his excellent *Star Wars: a Question of Initiative* (Wiley, 1986), "there is no debate raging in the scientific community regarding the feasibility of SDI, as it has the status of fantasy." For just one example, SDI will rely on millions of lines of untested computer coding — and it's a simple fact of life that almost no program ever works first time. "In the absence of a spare planet, there is no way of testing the system," says MP Tam Dalyell. Outside the pages of SF, we don't have a spare planet. (Obviously I have strong feelings on this; in an attempt to be unbiased, I will mention a pro-SDI book, Michael Charlton's *The Star Wars History* (BBC, 1986), which contains interviews with many of the political and military minds behind SDI.)

SF writers and readers should have a special ability to see the future, several possible futures, and how we might get there. Yet there have been a number of recent studies of just this, some good, some bad, done with no involvement at all from the SF community. *How Peace Came to the World* (MIT, 1986, $7.95) is a collection of essays submitted to "Peace 2010", a contest sponsored by the *Christian Science Monitor*. Some show peace following nuclear holocaust; some suggest how the superpowers might be influenced by other countries; some show peace coming from a change of consciousness. All these ideas have been examined in depth in SF, and I would be surprised if many of the writers had not been influenced, consciously or subconsciously, by SF ideas; but none of the many contributors is from the SF world.

A more scholarly futurological approach is taken by Paul Hawken, James Ogilvy and Peter Schwartz of the futures research group at Stanford Research Institute, in *Seven Tomorrows* (Bantam, 1982, £3.95). They paint seven equally unpalatable pictures of the near future, stemming from various political, economic and social trends in the USA; they conclude that the only viable future is a pluralist combination of the best of the Right, the Left and the "Transformational" (what we might call Green/New Age). Their bibliography cites Brunner's *The Sheep Look Up*, General Sir John Hackett's *The Third World War*, and a number of fairly familiar texts by science writers such as Barry Commoner, John Gribbin and Alvin Toffler. But surely there was far more potential source material in SF itself that they could have drawn on?

Welcome to my World was a BBC TV series which last year attempted to foretell the early 21st century socio-economic effects of today's information technology revolution. I tried to persuade Paul Kriwaczek, the producer, to consult John Brunner or David Langford or other SF writers who have specialised in exactly this; to at least have one of them in the final discussion programme. He didn't, and the series, especially the discussion, suffered badly for it.

Why don't non-SF writers and researchers on the future think to consult "the experts", people who make their daily living by speculating on the future, extrapolating from today's trends to realistic tomorrows' scenarios? Do they hold SF in contempt, or do they just think "They're writing fiction; we're doing *serious* research"?

And why aren't SF writers involving themselves in "serious" study of the future, or of the value SF can have in the "real" world? Well, they are.

On 11th June I took part in a one day conference at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, organised by longtime SF editor and futurologist George Hay under the auspices of the International Science Policy Foundation (one of the judging organisations of the Arthur C Clarke Award). The title was "Fiction into Science: Making Science Fiction Work". Speakers included Professor Alice Coleman, on JG Ballard's *High Rise* and her research into social breakdown in high-rise estates; Gwyneth Jones on the use of SF tropes by non-SF writers; Tim Kindberg, a computer researcher at the Central London Polytechnic, on software worms, and myself on software viruses; George Turner (on tape) on his book *The Sea and Summer*, the Clarke Award winner; science writer Dr John Gribbin criticising the book; and Michael Williams of the Science Museum on how to interest kids in science.

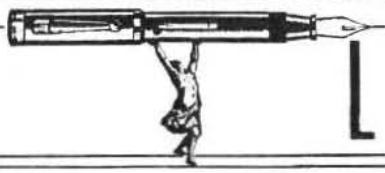
A fascinating conference — but I was bitterly disappointed with the turnout: there were fewer than 50 people (including the speakers) rattling around in the ICA theatre. Okay, the Changing of the Guard was going on just outside the ICA, and the Nelson Mandela concert was taking place at the same time; but where were all the people who talk airily about the significance of SF? This *could* be a major annual international conference, with radio and TV coverage and a book of the papers presented. It could be highly influential. But it won't be unless SF readers take the trouble to participate.

It's vital for us — writers and readers of SF — to explore the interfaces between SF and "the real world"; we have a contribution to make. But it's up to us to make it. No-one else will ask us to; we've seen that often enough.

So why do we (I include myself) find it so difficult to draw science fiction and reality together? SF is often denigrated as escapist fiction; are we just escaping from reality? Do we only read it for enjoyment? Or is it worth something more than that? SF, like all fiction, should help us to understand and cope with everyday life in the real world; unlike other fiction, it should also help ready us for the future or, dare I say it, for alternate realities. One letter this issue suggests this is what cyberpunk's all about; it may be, but I feel it's only a small part of it. George Turner and John Gribbin offer their ideas later in this issue.

SF — some SF — is doing its job; what's perhaps lacking is our own response, our own involvement, our own individual and collective positive action.

Or do we just leave it to everyone else?



LETTERS

«SEVERAL LETTERS RESPONDING TO V144 WERE HELD over as I had to prepare the issue early because of an operation and convalescence. The same thing's happening this time for a happier reason: a camping holiday in France, immediately after the Fairport Convention reunion weekend at Cropredy (any other regulars, see you there next year!). Remember, the sooner you write after reading Vector, *the more likely I'll be able to include your letter in the next issue. Let's start with a new member; and whether you've been in the BSFA 31 days or 31 years, your comments are always welcome.»*

DYLAN DYKINS
64 Elm Drive, Yr Wyddgrug, Clwyd CH7 1SG

MIKE CHRISTIE'S ARTICLE ("THE HITCH HIKER'S GUIDE TO LIT crit") was engrossing and demanding. I got the impression that a longer piece would have been easier to follow — explanations of the theories were somewhat brief and I needed further elaboration to satisfy myself that I'd grasped their meaning. Most confusing was the mention of Keats in connection with suppressing working class ambition. I've just done Keats at "A" level and thought he was pretty scathing of the "tyrrany" which "spread a horrible superstition against all innovation and improvement" (his words). Have I been misled?

I'm a new member and impressed by the magazines. I think the title of the BSFA is a little inaccurate, though: there seems to be just as much Fantasy as SF. Perhaps more people would join if they realised this.

«Maybe we should rename the BSFA "The British Science Fiction & Fantasy Association" — I agree, it would be more accurate.»

The Fantasy in *V144* (in every sense of the word) was Kathleen Raine's extract on Arthur. The English gentleman she depicts has nothing to do with the Celtic

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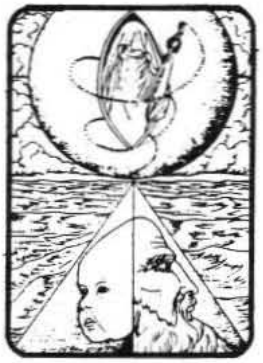
tradition and everything to do with nursery books. It is an insult to the oral tradition which has kept Arthur alive to set up the English distortion as the British primal myth. Worst of all was the lie that the Arthurian cave myth lives on in the English imagination — it lives on in the Welsh imagination, since it is the Welsh who continue to tell the legends. In fact, it arose in Wales because the English monarchy tried to anglicise Arthur in order to buttress claims to the Celtic nations. It seems that that cultural war is still raging.



MADAWC WILLIAMS
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I WAS A BIT SURPRISED THAT YOU INCLUDED MATERIAL FROM the "Merlin Conference" in the June/July issue of *Vector*. The BSFA is about fiction. The "Merlin Conference" claims to be about fact. but its standing as fact is very much open to question.

The first point to note is that "Merlin" is a purely literary creation. Welsh legend speaks, not of Merlin but of Myrddin (also spelt Merddin). There are references to at least two different men of that name, in fact. The Myrddin in the Welsh Arthurian legends became Merlin only when the Normans took up these tales. They changed the name because Myrddin sounds too much like the French word for shit. (By analogy: an English translator of, say, a Slavonic tale which included a character called Shitov would be likely to rename him Shimov.)

The fact that we have a *Merlin* conference, rather than one about *Myrddin* or *Merddin*, indicates that those involved are more interested in the fiction than in any facts that might lie behind the fiction. Which would be fine, if they didn't also claim to be revealing some "hidden truth". How can you believe people who claim to know hidden truths, but ignore those basic truths which any serious research will reveal?

In any case, it is likely that Myrddin originally had no part in the legends of Arthur. There is no connection between them in the earliest known sources. He is not there in the stories about Arthur in *The Mabinogion*, for instance. Almost certainly, he has been added in later. Just as Friar Tuck and Maid Marian were added to the legend of Robin Hood.

What of the Tarot? Tarot cards are a venerable old card deck used in Italy for several trumping card games, which are still played today. The trumps are just that: cards that trump other cards in the games. It's much like Whist or Bridge, except that there are a set of permanent trumps in the Tarot games.

Tarot decks were *never* used for divination before the late 18th century. All earlier references to them are to their use as playing cards. They became popular for divination in countries where the Italian designs of playing cards were unfamiliar, making Tarot decks look strange and occult. The striking and puzzling images on the cards are most likely a random collection; useful mnemonics for the mediæval mind, but with no deeper significance. As for the modified or "restored" versions — these have no basis at all, beyond the imagination of those who draw them. (All this is proved, with many references and details, in Michael Dummett's book *The Game of Tarot*.)

There may well be aspects to the universe that we do not yet know, that we as yet barely suspect. There may be forces at work that science can not yet deal with. But soft pap like Merlin-mysticism and Tarot-tripe distract from any possibility of learning something about them. Likewise they cover over and obscure real history and the real mythology. By all means publish it if you think that readers will like it. But do please also publish this reply.

> *«The extracts were published because, as stated, Merlin is of interest to many SF and Fantasy readers. The historical/mythological "facts" about Myrddin (and his is not the only name to change its form in retelling over the centuries) are set out as clearly as you wish in Geoffrey Ashe's article in the (first)* Book of Merlin. *The point about the conferences and books, so far as I can see, is that they are prepared to consider* all *aspects of the Merlin mythos; the later accretions are not in any way considered "historical", but are studied for what they show of the nature and function of myth. Nobody is claiming to be revealing a "hidden truth".*
>
> *If you read the first extract, you will see that Tarot is being used for story-telling purposes, and* not *for divinatory purposes as your letter implies. This point is made very clearly in RJ Stewart's article, which stresses that modern Tarot trump images are symbols of mythic types; neither mysticism nor tripe enter into it.*
>
> *My own feeling on the rationalist approach you favour is that, by its simplistic exclusivity there is a danger of losing possible babies when rejecting the admittedly murky bathwater.»*

PAM BADDELEY
55 Union Street, Farnborough, Hants GU14 7PX

AT RISK OF BEING A SPOILSPORT MAY I ASK THE POINT OF putting an April Fool article in *V144* (not very sporting of *you*, surely?). I couldn't care less about whether Les Dawson has or hasn't written a book — after all, Eric Morecambe had vampire stories published so it wasn't so very bizarre. All kinds of celebrities have had bad books published just because they *are* celebrities.

The part that annoyed me was wasting two 14p stamps writing to *Interzone* to enquire which issues contained the "manic vignettes" by Ben Elton referred to in David Garnett's introduction. I enjoy Elton's writing and comedy and was intrigued... and disappointed when *IZ* informed me that "it was meant to be a joke". Presumably the whole thing was a hoax? I suppose I should have realised that from the absurdity of the other names mentioned but I skimmed over those reading it on the train and unlike them, the inclusion of Elton was not absurd since he is, first and foremost, a writer.

I wouldn't have minded if it had been in the April issue but I think it's a bit unfair to inflict this sort of thing on unsuspecting readers at other times especially considering the general level of distortion, omission and downright lies prevalent in modern journalism — I mean, we get enough of this sort of thing in the papers and on TV without having to gauge whether every article in *Vector* is about non-existent books and stories.

> *«I confess David Garnett's first para fooled me initially as well. But the rest of the article, unfortunately, is quite definitely not a spoof.»*

Just to add to the debate on politics and SF/everything else in society. One of the meanings of "politics" is "that branch of moral philosophy dealing with the state or social organism as a whole" as well as "the science dealing with the form, organisation and administration of a state or part of one..." (*SOED*). I

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think Jim England perhaps is thinking of *party* politics which has tended to debase the word/concept. I think also, with the evolution of the English language, which still progresses despite pedants and dictionaries, that "political" is coming to be a much wider concept as in "the personal is political". To give another example to yours, of politics in *medicine*: trials for new drugs to combat AIDS are being delayed by manufacturers while they argue about patents. Other cheap and long-available drugs which may significantly delay the onset of AIDS by interfering with the virus are not being medically trialled because they have been around for years and are therefore out of patent and cheap — so no money to be made out of them.

«Pam continues with details of such cases, including collusion with governments.»

Incidentally, I can't find which magazine it appeared in but I'm willing to take a poster advertising the BSFA for our noticeboard at work.

«We're working on this; details when available. Thanks for offering; the more publicity we can all give the BSFA the better.»

DYLAN DYKINS
64 Elm Drive, Yr Wyddgrug, Clwyd CH7 1SG

MY DICTIONARY DESCRIBES *ISM* AS: "ANY DISTINCTIVE DOCTrine or practice"; or, on *-ism*: "expressing a state, system or principle". As examples it includes barbarism, cretinism, Fenianism and jingoism. Jingoism is interesting because, after giving "blustering patriot" for "Jingo", the book says "esp. supporter of Beaconsfield's policy in 1878".

Now if Jim England had his way in those days via *physical* time-shift, no-one would have dared support Beaconsfield (Disraeli enjoying aristocratic rights) because it would also have meant supporting an *-ism*; something which Jim England defines as a "narrow fashionable social concern... limited to particular parts of the world and periods in it" (*V145*). Of course, any historians would argue that Britain's acquisition of Cyprus has had social effects in that country which are still important today. The fools should read Jim England's definition of *-ism*!

But perhaps he would support the 1878 Jingoism. Perhaps he would argue that that wasn't what he meant by *-ism* at all. The *-isms* he might complain about in those days might be those he uses to describe people belonging to the non-establishment: transitory groups which cling to the immortal status quo, never achieving anything. People like, for example, Shelley.

But hold on — didn't he say that *-isms* from the past look "narrow" from the "long perspective" of the future? That they are limited to the time they materialise in and then explode into thin air like a bubble, never to be seen of again? All we radicals should abandon feminism on the spot, then, because from our enlightened position on the (evolutionary) political timescale we can look back to the middle of the 19th century and see Shelley campaigning for feminism. What a mind-blowing anachronism! Proof of time travel at last!

SIMON NICHOLSON
290 London Road, Langley, Slough, Berks SL3 7HT

WITH THE PASSING OF CLAUSE 28 WE SEE THE FIRST OF YOUR past Editorial predictions realised. Censorship lives and it is growing stronger. I find it interesting that you should quote Pastor Niemoller in *V144*; I believe the full quote should read:

First they came for the Jews and I did not speak out because I was not a Jew.
Then they came for the Communists and I did not speak out because I was not a Communist.
Then they came for the homosexuals and I did not speak out because I was not a homosexual.
Then they came for the trade unionists and I did not speak out because I was not a trade unionist.
Then they came for me, and there was no-one left to speak out for me.

The third line is usually missed out, so that many do not even know it exists. But then, how many people are aware that the Nazis persecuted gays?

And now I see that Mrs Thatcher has told the television companies they must have certain standards or she will legislate. But whose standards? Why, Mrs Thatcher's, of course.

Politics affect our lives at all levels. If *Vector* is becoming more political it is merely a response to a world in which politics are interfering with our lives more and more.

«Yet another version includes "Then they came for the Catholics and I was a Protestant so I didn't speak up." Persecution and censorship because of different beliefs should always be resisted; as should (the other side of the coin) the imposition of one person's beliefs on others. It is vital that SF & Fantasy should continue to be genres where any belief can be examined.»

LES ESCOTT
Morrigan Publications, 84 Ivy Avenue, Southdown, Bath, Avon BA2 1AN

KEV McVEIGH'S ARTICLE ON CYBERPUNK: "OH GOD NOT ANOTHER one," I thought. Though this did prove to be more interesting than I'd anticipated.

Kev cited RA Lafferty as one of the influences. Having published KW Jeter's *Death Arms*, a novel labellers would no doubt term cyberpunk, and two novels by Ray, the first to be published in this country in over 10 years — a deplorable state of affairs — I felt I should perhaps take issue with his inclusion. But on second thoughts, I felt that Ray's comments would be more valid and interesting. So knowing Ray would not object to my quoting from his letter, and in the vain hope that this will be the last word on the subject:

"I don't even know what the so-called 'cyberpunk' movement is, though its practitioners have spilled quite a few words trying to explain what it is. The fact that hardly anybody else knows what the movement is must indicate that the cyberpunks don't write very clear explanations." — *RA Lafferty.*

And so say all of us!

CECIL NURSE
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THE MOST IMPORTANT POINT KEV McVEIGH MISSES SEEMS TO BE that much of what has been said about cyberpunk is prescriptive rather than descriptive, a manifesto for present and future writers and readers to plug into rather than analysis of some past tradition, a challenge

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rather than some arrogant cry of victory. As a result, the critical hand that he applies grasps at straws. Style (hi-tech gloss), "street-credibility" (saying "fuck" a lot, but also drugs and general lowlife), content (computers, wetware), revolutionary ideology (misinterpreting Sterling's comment about Heinlein being on the same side of the barricades: standing up for individual freedom against tyranny). In fact, the major criteria he uses seem to be a. whether the writer claims to have been writing cyberpunk or not; b. whether they have been published post-Gibson or not. If they deny being cyberpunks, then that excludes them, and if they were writing or published before the phrase was coined, that counts them out. It all smacks of that smug semi-"literary" traditionalist attitude towards SF that cyberpunk specifically sets out to defeat i.e. by defining its roots and product in terms of pop-culture.

So what is the cyberpunk challenge? I believe it is this: the consumer society, technological culture and global complexity that we live in is not reflected in many of the SF future worlds we read about. We are surrounded by technology, the day-to-day product of the cross-fertilisation of science and marketing, and what we know and see of it has less to do with the former than the latter. The "designer-labelling" of products that is so despised by John Shirley is nothing more than an extension into the future of this fundamental attribute of modernity. Computers *aren't* just computers; they are Amstrads, Spectrums, Macs, IBMs... This is what we *see*, as ordinary people... The same applies to every other technology; a named company makes it and markets it. In the future you won't just have spaceships, you'll have Ford, Saab and Novodny-Grotek spaceships... Thus to call a cyberspace deck an Ondo-Sendai is about right, and represents a greater engagement with the future that we live in than, for example, to imagine a single entrepreneur taking man to the stars the way Heinlein writes it, or to become involved with the explication of anti-gravity and FTL travel (pseudo-science guff?).

Cyberpunk claims to be the modern SF. Is there such a thing as modern SF? Obviously things have changed since the key point about SF was the "scientific literacy" of its writers. Relative to the 50s, the late 80s are an unimaginable future. Medium-sized businesses have more data processing power than entire Defence Departments used to have, on the one hand, and on the other, the DHSS is only now beginning to computerise. SSTs are a failure, there is only one space station, people still starve in India; but there are wrist-calculators, TVs in almost every home, immensely complex music equipment. Whether you call it cyberpunk or not, it seems to me that there *must be* a "modern" SF, written by the people who were born to this future, and breaking with the traditions of those who came before. Whether or not it has been written yet, the question that McVeigh seems to be addressing, is irrelevant.

I would submit, further, that under the guise of critical (scientific?) rigour, McVeigh has written a wholly unsympathetic article that entirely misses the essence of "the cyberpunk manifesto". He has become hung up on the hype the way people's brains used to seize up when they saw "shit" on the page. Would he rather that SF remain virtuous and retreat to some cloistered place where the knowledgeable can gather to study and evaluate it? The reality is that a huge number of SF trappings and themes have become common knowledge through films, none of which makes the effort to explain how things work (technological literacy — our suspension of disbelief does not require apologias for the gadgets). They are written for the grand sweep, the striking images, the archetypal configurations (visionary intensity); for example, *Terminator* — a conscienceless killer android sent back in time causes some everyday mayhem in a big American city. Anyone who is not middle-aged, middle-class, white, American, or male, knows just what size of book would be needed to describe all the assumptions this implies. Fictional technique, well, how can you deal with any of this without choosing a style to suit, not because you wish to experiment with style (as the New Wave was notorious for doing) but because your content demands it? For example, it seems to me that the modern sensawunda has less to do with stars than with contemplation and experience of the immense complexity of the human environment. No doubt there are other ways of expressing this than through low-life characters in the bowels of the society, immersed in their own specific cultures, but that is one way. How does one express this emotion? Huge, vast, humungous, stupendous? How about squandrous, bologious, Ragnaresque? New words for new things. How about cyberpunk?

«Some interesting points here, which in part tie in with my editorial this issue. My main doubt about the worth of cyberpunk is that I've seen very little evidence of it examining the human condition — "the big Why". This is why, on reflection, I wouldn't call Philip K Dick an ur-cyberpunk writer: all his gutter-glitz, rather than an end in itself, was a framework for his metaphysical enquiry.

«Finally, a well-deserved slap on the wrist for Paul and myself:»

LISA TUTTLE
1 Ortygia House, 6 Lower Road, Harrow, Middlesex HA2 0DA

THERE ARE TIMES WHEN A REVIEWER'S KNOWLEDGE OF HOW AND when a text was written can contribute to a greater understanding of it — but what about when that "knowledge" has grown out of a misunderstanding? Reading the reviews in *V145* of Garry Kilworth's latest novel, *Cloudrock*, I cringed at the way you'd built one piece of information — that an earlier version of *Cloudrock* was written while the author was at University — into a neat, and completely mistaken, critical theory to explain both the strengths and the weaknesses of the novel. I can verify that Garry began work on *Cloudrock* while he was at University because I read the first draft shortly after he finished it — in 1984. You see, when Garry became a University student he was not the inexperienced youth you have imagined... he was married, with two grown children, two careers behind him already, and the published author of many books including *The Songbirds of Pain*, *Theatre of Timesmiths*, *Gemini God*, and *In Solitary*. So your fantasy of the experienced writer moulding the daring but immature work of his early youth is just that... a fantasy. It's the same book, of course, from the same writer, no matter how many years it took to emerge in its final form, but it is clear from David's review ("I'd been going to say..." and "on reflection it makes sense that this is a rewriting of an early work...") that a reader's belief about when and how it was written can make a major difference in *how* a text is read, so I did want to set the record straight.

«Thankyou for correcting us, Lisa. I'd like to apologise to Garry for the misunderstanding, and for the way it makes our reviews appear patronising. I also apologise to Vector *readers for our carelessness in relying on what other people told us, rather than checking the facts for ourselves before writing our reviews. Our mistake does not, however, detract from the fact that* Cloudrock *is, I believe, Garry Kilworth's best novel to date.»*

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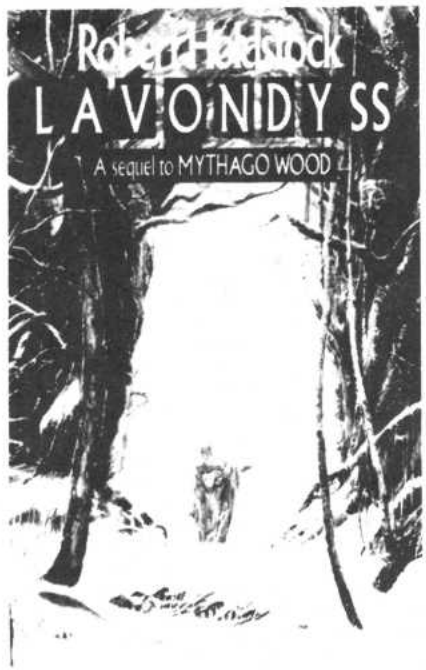

GOLLANCZ

THE MORNING AFTER — THE YEAR BEFORE

DAVID GARNETT

IN 1987 THERE WERE THREE *YEAR'S BEST* SF COLLECTIONS, edited by Donald A Wollheim, Terry Carr and Gardner Dozois, which reprinted stories from 1986. I bought them all and read most of the stories in the first two, although I never did get around to finishing the Dozois collection. It was just too big. Like most novels are.

There were 10 stories in the Wollheim, 11 in the Carr, and 27 in the Dozois. 10 of these were duplicates, which meant there was a total of 38 different stories. Six of these first appeared in collections or anthologies, but 32 came from various magazines and so the date of their first publication was recorded on the copyright pages:

January	4	May	2	September	1
February	2	June	4	October	0
March	3	July	1	November	1
April	9	August	3	December	2

Why were so few stories picked from the last few months? The answer seemed obvious: In order for these books to be published quickly, most of the stories were chosen long before the end of the year. Nine out of Wollheim's selection, for example, were from the magazines: January (1), February (1), March (2), April (3), May (1); and the latest dated story was from August. September, October, November, December? No chance. The pattern of the two other anthologies was similar, although not so extreme.

But what was so special about April that a quarter of the "best" stories were published in that month?

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TERRY CARR DIED LAST YEAR, BUT IN 1988 THERE ARE AGAIN three annual *Year's Best* SF collections: the Wollheim, the Dozois — and *The Orbit Science Fiction Yearbook*, which I have edited for Futura.

It all began in a pub, the Wellington, February 4th 1988. John Jarrold had just become the new science fiction editor at Futura and he was talking about his plans, the kind of books he hoped to publish. He mentioned that he would like to reprint one of the *Year's Best* collections. That was when I had the Idea. Many an idea seems great in a pub, in fact most of them do — although the morning after, they usually don't. But the next day, this one seemed just as good.

I had already started an anthology for Sphere. Martin Fletcher had asked me to edit a collection of new SF by British authors. Compared to that, compiling a reprint anthology would be simple. I just had to read through all the magazines and collections and pick out what I liked best. Everything had been published before, therefore the standard would be much higher than that of the manuscripts I was receiving — and I wouldn't need to write rejection letters for the ones I didn't like. Easy...

I wrote up a proposal for the anthology and gave it to John two weeks later. He liked the idea. And, the ways of publishers being strange and mysterious but above all *slow*, two months later I was given the go-ahead. Publishers can work fast when they want to, however, which is why it only took two months. And Futura have worked with equal speed in order to publish the book within six months.

Time for some more facts and figures:

According to *Locus*, there were 1026 new SF/Horror/Fantasy books published in the USA last year. (For "USA" read "the world" — because SF is almost totally Americanised. Americanized, I mean.) It would be difficult to keep up with every new novel; but it is still possible to read every new story that is published.

There are now only four American SF magazines: *Amazing*, *Analog*, *Asimov's* and *F&SF*. But these are very difficult to find, and most of their sales are now by subscription. In Britain, even the specialist shops carry very few copies. I was in Forbidden Planet in London a few months ago, when I heard someone asking if they had the previous month's *F&SF*. "No," came the reply, "we've sold out, we always do." No comment...

Amazing averages the most stories per month, but only appears bi-monthly. *Analog* and *Asimov's* both use serials — the former almost always, the latter rarely, although twice during 1987 — which meant less for me to read, although they both produce 13 issues per year. *F&SF* published the most stories during the year.

Amazing	55 stories
Analog	64
Asimov's	64
F&SF	94

Which is a total of 277. And that's just for starters. *Omni* usually publishes a couple of stories each issue, and there are all the original anthologies as well. This is just the USA. There's also Britain, which last year meant *Interzone* and three anthologies: *Tales from the Forbidden Planet*, *Other Edens* and the *Gollancz/Sunday Times SF Competition Stories*.

Call it a total of 500 stories. (*Locus* mentions 800; but 500 was enough for me.) Reading that quantity of stories during a year is simple enough; but over two months, I discovered, it isn't quite so easy.

The reading never became an ordeal, however. If I didn't like a story, I stopped reading — and those I stopped could easily be discounted.

Then I tried *Analog*.

•

THE *ORBIT YEARBOOK* IS DESIGNED AS MORE THAN SIMPLY A collection of short stories, no matter how good they are. The book lives up to its title in that it provides a summary of the year in science fiction, a record of the events of 1987: the awards, the deaths, the fights. It also includes articles by two major science fiction authorities.

John Clute is one of the most respected and influential critics of the field, and he provides a survey of all the significant novels of 1987. Normally, I admit, I avoid book reviews. Not so with John's. His reviews are usually far more entertaining than the books he discusses, and this is certainly true of his contribution to the *Yearbook*. His comprehensive analysis ranges far and wide — and deep.

Brian Aldiss, as the saying goes, needs no introduction. He is the godfather of British SF. For nine years he and Harry Harrison edited another *Year's Best* series. Brian wrote an afterword to each volume, an overview of the year in science fiction. And this is what he has done for the *Yearbook*, his views on contemporary SF given in his own unique style.

Even if you've read all the magazines and anthologies, these two articles alone are worth the price of the book.

•

I USED TO BUY *ANALOG* EVERY MONTH. I USED TO BUY EVERY SF magazine every month. That was more than 20 years ago, however, and *Analog* was the first magazine I stopped buying regularly, although I still bought it occasionally

during the 70s. Editing the *Yearbook*, I read it again for the first time in about a decade.

And I couldn't believe it. Do they still write stuff like that? Do they still publish stuff like that? They do.

Analog, of course, used to be *Astounding*. During 1987, it started boldly proclaiming its pulp origins on the cover. The magazine is so memorable that I managed to buy an issue I'd read a couple of weeks earlier — and had already forgotten.

Analog is the best-selling SF magazine. Which must prove something — although I prefer not to consider what it is.

I didn't find a story for the *Yearbook* in *Analog*. Wollheim hasn't used an *Analog* story for the last two years; and Dozois, despite the number of stories he considers the "best" has only reprinted two from *Analog* in his last couple of volumes.

Neither did I find anything to include from *Amazing*. *Amazing* is even older than *Analog/Astounding* (as it also boasts), but at least seems to be doing its best by publishing some interesting new authors.

Thank Gernsback for *Asimov's* and *F&SF*, which between them provided five out of the 12 stories I chose for the *Yearbook*; *Omni* provided two more, and *Interzone* one. Two-thirds of the contents, therefore, came from the magazines.

Two of those stories won the 1988 Nebulas: Pat Murphy's "Rachel in Love" and Kate Wilhelm's "Forever Yours, Anna".

EDITING AN ANTHOLOGY IS EASY. JUST CHOOSE YOUR FAVOURite stories, then publish them.

But it doesn't quite work out like that. A good collection has to provide the right balance of stories: a variation of subject and style, treatment and length.

This is what I tried to do with the *Yearbook*. Having chosen the stories, that was just the beginning. I next had to contact the authors or their agents to secure anthology rights to the stories. Then I had to do my own part: write the introduction, the summary of the year, and the biographies.

What can you say in an introduction? Not much. "Here are some stories. I liked them. I hope you do." Which is more or less what I said.

What about the summary? A list of facts and figures, obituaries and prizes, although useful for reference purposes, doesn't make the most interesting reading. So between the facts and figures, there is opinion; between the obits and awards, there is controversy, venom, drama, invective — well, more totally biased comment...

The hardest editorial task was writing the biographies. I didn't want them all to sound the same: "A Writer was born in ---- and now lives in ----. S/he is the author of the novels ----, ---- and ----, and won a Hugo/Nebula for her/his story ----." It was also important to get the biogs *right*. I've always found non-fiction much harder to write than fiction, because with fiction you can make things up... just like working for a newspaper, I suppose.

•

BECAUSE I WAS CHOOSING THE STORIES FOR THE *YEARBOOK* very late, I could have waited until the Nebulas were announced, then published the short story and novelette winners. But I didn't want to be influenced by the results, and normally my idea of the "best" disagrees with the Nebula and Hugo results.

So I'd already contacted Murphy and Wilhelm, and they had accepted my offer of publication in the *Yearbook*, by the time the Nebulas were awarded. Wollheim and Dozois also picked the winners. The only other overlap was that I chose Lucius Shepard's "The Sun Spider", which is also included in the Wollheim anthology.

The last volume of Terry Carr's *Universe* provided another story, as did one of the dreaded "shared world" anthologies. Almost all of these collections have been Fantasy, and the *Wild Cards* series, edited by George RR Martin, borders on Fantasy — the books are all about superheroes. The first story from the first volume, however, establishes the series but contains no such superhero. This is Howard Waldrop's "Thirty Minutes Over Broadway!" which is included in the *Yearbook*; and the book also reprints Waldrop's annotations, a fascinating insight into all the unseen work which went into the story.

The final two stories are taken from *Other Edens*: Lisa Tuttle's "The Wound" and Garry Kilworth's "Murderers Walk". In a way, these were the hardest stories to choose, because they are both by friends of mine. But that didn't seem good enough reason for excluding them — so I didn't.

•

HALF OF THE STORIES HAVE ALREADY BEEN MENTIONED. THE others are: Jonathan Carroll's "Friend's Best Man" — this seems the least scientifictional (to quote *Amazing*) story in the book, except that it has a real sting in the — er — tail; "Agents" by Paul di Filippo — who is "one of tomorrow's brightest stars in the SF firmament" and has ten stories currently sold and awaiting publication; "Ménage à Super-Trois" by Felix C Gotschalk — who has been writing for 20 years, but his first sale is still awaiting publication in Ellison's *Last Desperate Visions* *sic*; Richard Kadrey's "Goodbye Houston Street, Goodbye" — which you have all read in *Interzone*; Marta Randall's "Lapidary Nights" — the most "traditional science fiction" story in the whole volume; and "E-Ticket to Namland" by Dan Simmons — a Vietnam story which has far more impact than any of those in last year's Vietnam SF anthology, *In the Field of Fire*.

The result is a great collection, and I'm very happy with everything about the *Yearbook*.

Except for one thing: my name on the cover should be larger...

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(Three of the 12 stories are reprinted from magazines dated April.)

The Orbit Science Fiction Yearbook **edited by David S Garnett will be published by Futura on November 10, "B" format, 336pp, £4.99.**

SCIENCE AND SCIENCE FICTION

GEORGE TURNER'S ARTHUR C CLARKE AWARD ACCEPTance speech stressed the moral duty of SF writers: scientific extrapolation. Science (and SF) writer John Gribbin responds below.

AT A GATHERING AT THE INSTITUTE OF CONTEMPORARY Arts this summer, the Arthur C Clarke Award for 1988 was presented to the publishers of *The Sea and Summer*, standing in for the author, George Turner. Turner wasn't present because he lives in Australia. But he sent along an audio tape with his thoughts on the award and his views regarding the rôle of science in science fiction. His decision to stay at home was a wise one — had he expressed those thoughts in person, someone might well have bopped him on the nose. As it is, I am moved to offer my own views on the rôle of science in science fiction to *Vector*, in the hope of finding out if it is me or him that is out of step.

Turner published the first of his four SF novels 10 years ago, when he was 62. This didn't stop him castigating the entire genre for its failure to provide "scientific" accounts of the problems facing mankind, and thereby missing out on an opportunity to educate the huddled masses to the point where they fling off their chains and rise up in rebellion against the terrible things that are done to them. His idea of good SF is *1984*, or *Brave New World*. His own award-winning book is a gloomy tale of an overpopulated world with rising seas lapping around the slums of Melbourne. Anyone who has watched *Neighbours* may well regard this as the best reason to praise the greenhouse effect — but I'll let that pass. In *The Sea and Summer* there isn't really any science *fiction* at all; it is all science fact, at most modest extrapolation from present trends. Polemic and propaganda it may be — but if I'd been one of the judges, it wouldn't have got a sniff at an SF award, let alone one bearing Clarke's name.

So — does the science in science fiction matter? That rather depends on the fiction. Terry Pratchett's "Discworld" novels, splendid though they are, will never be reviewed in the pages of *New Scientist*. On the other hand, Arthur Clarke, Fred Pohl and Charles Sheffield have all been discussed there recently, producing a grand total of two letters of complaint (out of half a million readers) protesting that a "serious scientific publication" should not stoop to discussing such rubbish. The bad news is that there have been precisely *no* letters in praise of the magazine's policy of reviewing SF. So, the editor (a former editor of *Vector*, by the way) threatens to sweep such stuff from its pages in response to public pressure.

As one of the writers contributing such reviews to that magazine, and strongly disagreeing with the views of those two letter-writers I was delighted to learn of the award of the Arthur C Clarke "prize" to George Turner's book, in the naive hope (until I read it) that it would give me ammunition to shoot them down with, and to persuade the editor of the error of his ways. How cruelly my hopes were dashed. The "best" SF novel of the year it certainly is not. Although there are usually as many opinions on that score as there are novels published each year, even on its own terms of warning us about unpleasant futures it can't hold a candle to Bill Gibson. But the greenhouse theme is certainly a provocative and timely one. So why do I despair of using this novel to persuade those two critics of SF that there is a place for serious scientific speculation about our future, and

I HAD NEVER HEARD OF THE INTERNATIONAL SCIENCE POLICY Foundation until I heard that *The Sea and Summer* had taken this year's Arthur C Clarke Award. In fact, I still know precious little about it but will certainly have to find out more, because the title sounds like that of an organisation which believes in some things that I believe in and would like to see put into practice.

The title of the seminar on 11 June 1988, "The Practical Applications of Science Fiction", set bells ringing in my ears. To explain why, let me read a short passage:

"...the question is one of convincing humanity that it must learn restraint, and of compensating for the resultant psychological losses. It needs study now, not in 30 years time.

"Humanity faces, in the next half century, not a crisis but a constellation of crises, and science fiction, which once had a genuine concern for the future, has scarcely a word to say about encroaching realities. It is the one genuinely optimistic branch of 20th century literature, the only one that believes that if you don't look, whatever it is will go away.

"It would be idle to pretend that a responsible science fiction could answer the bitter questions waiting, but it could begin the process of laying out, in dramatic form, the need for thought and the areas of need. Its largest readership is among today's young who will live to face the consequences of present thoughtlessness. Some thinking should begin in a genre specifically designed, in its origins, to foster thought."

I wrote those words four years ago, in a biographical memoir called *In the Heart or In the Head*, which has not been published outside Australia. I wrote them as part of an argument that a responsible literature must play a part in *forming* society, not merely reporting on it. And how can that rôle be better filled than by considering the future — its promises, its threats and its unclear, looming possibilities — and meditating upon them in a form assimilable by a mass readership?

Please don't try to remind me that science fiction already writes about the future. It does nothing of the sort. It merely fantasises about different times and places. It takes the easy way out. How much even semi-factual science fiction has been written about nuclear war? Practically none. What science fiction does is skip the hard part and proceed directly to the post-holocaust era (postulating that there will indeed be one) and fill it with genetically impossible monsters, telepaths and, lately, sword-swinging Amazons.

How many stories do you read concerning the *near* future, based in logical fashion on the indications of the present? Damned few, and those few are usually too timid to matter.

What I am getting at is this: Having published these statements in a book widely read by science fiction fans in my own country, it was up to me to produce a novel in accordance with my own creed. The result was *The Sea and Summer*. I had two purposes in mind.

One was to write a science fiction novel in mainstream fashion, designed to appeal to the wider readership that so rightly distrusts science fiction. That is, to base a story firmly on people, not on wild imagining. Most science fiction stories are dictated by their fantasised background; the characters act as their background dictates, demonstrating ideas rather than the truth of behaviour. I wanted to set my characters against a background which, however fanciful, was to them the norm against which they operated. I wanted to write about people who would not only be people of their time but people of any time, living out what seem to them normal lives in familiar surroundings. I wanted to base the work firmly on strongly delineated characters who would allow the reader to see the future through their eyes, not merely the author's.

That was the literary ambition. The second and in some ways more important purpose was to produce a recognisable future, one fairly close to home, whose differences could immediately be understood as proceeding from present conditions.

Now, I know that so-called futurology is about as reliable as teacup reading. Any activity more than a year or two ahead of us is a mystery. The most obvious developments can be negated or transformed by a politician's throwaway line, a laboratory breakthrough, the rise of a mad mullah or something as simple as a rainstorm preventing a protest march while somebody's baby drowns in a

flooded gutter. Remember Ray Bradbury's butterfly? The future is as fragile as that.

But — there are trends which will be difficult to reverse and some of them may lead to disaster; they are integral to the planet and to us. Something of them will survive to plague us, whatever happens.

Here are some of them:

- The Greenhouse Effect
- Overpopulation
- The failure to produce a durable economic theory
- Ecological degradation
- Overuse of natural resources
- Inability to produce a philosophy of living to keep pace with explosive technological change.

There are others, but there is a limit to what one rather ordinary bloke can handle in a single novel, and these were my choices. They were quite enough for the depiction of eight or nine major characters struggling for existence in a nation of wildly fluctuating weather conditions, melting icecaps, bankrupted treasury, near-total automation and a government driven to murderous devices to avert drowning in insoluble problems.

I admit freely that I chose a worse-case scenario, set in the years 2041-2061, and chose it deliberately. I have already said that forecasting the future is impossible, so what I have said in the novel is this:

Nobody cares about the future and we will pay for not caring.

We talk about leaving a better world for our children but don't give a tinker's damn for the grandchildren.

The reason for this neglect is simple: We are too busy surviving from day to day to plan beyond emergencies. I call it bandaid planning.

The situation with governments and administrative bodies is even worse. Often they cannot take necessary action against disaster and decay because to do so would see them thrown out of office by an electorate that wants to be reassured and cossetted *now*, not tomorrow. And that includes Mrs Thatcher, who has bucked the odds pretty bravely but certainly knows how far she must not go. No government can plan beyond its term of office — and so the future rolls on, unresisted.

An Australian scientist, the late Sir MacFarlane Burnett, said — this is the epigraph to *The Sea and Summer* — "We must plan for five years ahead and 20 years and a hundred years."

Indeed yes! But how?

And this is the final meaning of the novel, the bottom line, as the Yanks say:

Because of its limited tenure of office, no government exists or ever has existed that could plan against the truly menacing aspects of the future. It could set up study groups — and see its successors refuse funding because of some other urgent bandaid commitment.

So it is the common people who must be made aware of what is being done to our planet and ultimately to ourselves. Only an overwhelming mass of public opinion can force action in an area where Barry Jones, the Australian Minister for Science, has admitted the rightness of my statement that there are no votes in the future.

Sooner or later we must *promote* votes in the future.

Whether or not such an organisation as the ISPF can have any effect I do not know, but it sounds like a reasonable beginning.

A responsible science fiction can also play its part. Remember *Brave New World* and *1984*? Neither was a great work of art but their ideas have become part of 20th century culture. Such impacts can be made again.

The Sea and Summer is an attempt at it, though I don't really expect to achieve the impact of Huxley or Orwell, but there are others who can surely do it better. I only hope they will.

And if anybody whines that they don't like novels with a message, let them drown when the sea rises, as it will. Every novel worth its salt has something to say. Some say it loudly, some subtly, but they say it. And it is nearly too late for subtlety.

The future is rushing on us almost unstoppably — and science fiction, which should be aware and vocal, doesn't seem to have noticed.

As they would say in the gutters where I spent some of my low-life childhood, "Get the finger out, you mob! There's a job to do."

The Arthur C Clarke Award, for the best SF novel of the previous year, is judged jointly by representatives of the BSFA, the Science Fiction Foundation and the International Science Policy Foundation.

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that fiction can often bring home in gut-reaction terms truths that we already know with our minds, but have failed to appreciate emotionally?

The science in this kind of novel is not really fiction at all, except in the sense that it has not yet happened. There is no doubt that the world will get warmer because of the release of carbon dioxide to the air by human activities, no doubt that ice caps will melt as a result, and no doubt that sea levels will rise, flooding Melbourne and, hopefully, washing Kylie Minogue away. The fiction lies in the description of the human response to this threat. Contrast this with, say, Orson Scott Card's *Speaker for the Dead*, which posits interstellar travel and faster than light communication, both of which most scientists would regard as pure fantasy. Or with Greg Bear's *Blood Music*, where the genetic engineering is uncomfortably close to the possibilities inherent in existing technology. The plausibility of the science varies from book to book; what makes a book worthwhile is not the plausibility of the science it contains, but how good the writing is. A good story with believable people facing real problems wins every time. If that book happens to deal with genuine scientific problems concerning the immediate future of humankind, then so much the better. But, speaking as a trained but non-practising scientist, I am quite happy to accept faster than light travel if that is necessary to make the wheels of the plot go round. What raises my scientific hackles is when such hokum is presented as plausible extrapolation of present day science — a sin which even Arthur Clarke himself is guilty of in at least one book.

So the thrust of my contribution to the debate Turner sparked may not be entirely what those who know my background expect. The science in science fiction is not, in my opinion, important *as science*. The criterion by which we judge SF should be whether we care about the people in the story — or, simply, whether we enjoy it as a rattling good read. What is special about SF is that it can place its characters in situations that do not exist in the real world — facing the flood waters in Melbourne, struggling to repair a damaged spaceship in Mars orbit, or communicating with telepathic dragons. If we don't care whether or not the characters are engulfed by the flood waters, fail to mend their spacecraft, or get eaten by the dragons, then the book has failed, however impeccable its scientific pedigree.

Where does that leave *The Sea and Summer*? Some way below the top of division two. It is, indeed, good to see SF addressing real problems. But let's not get carried away singing the book's literary merits, which really do not stand up to very close inspection, and giving it awards which take the gloss off the name associated with the award. Fiction that really grips the reader is worth having even at the expense of scrupulous scientific accuracy; scientific accuracy is not much good if the fiction fails to grip.

JOHN GRIBBIN makes his living writing scientific non-fiction. His hobby is writing science fiction, usually for Analog. *His first SF novel,* Double Planet *(co-written with Marcus Chown,* New Scientist *reviews editor) will be published by Gollancz in November.*

THE DRAGONHIKER'S GUIDE TO BATTLEFIELD COVENANT AT DUNE'S EDGE: ODYSSEY TWO

AN INTERVIEW WITH DAVID LANGFORD

DAVID LANGFORD, HOW DID YOU COME TO WRITE A BOOK of alleged SF and Fantasy parodies appearing in late 1988 under the wholly new imprint "Drunken Dragon Press" and bearing the wholly ludicrous and inept title The Dragonhiker's Guide to Battlefield Covenant at Dune's Edge: Odyssey Two*?*

Well...

Would you consider yourself influenced by the satirical traditions of Aristophanes, Swift or L Ron Hubbard? Are the political subtexts of your meta-fictions to be regarded as chiefly of ludic or didactic import? Do you generally prefer to work in the Gothic or the post-Gothic mode? Am I going too fast for you?

It's not fair. You've got a list of questions there and I haven't got a list of answers.

Arising out of that reply, would you not accept that the semiotic paradigm... all right, have some questions from the easy list. Gee, Mr Langford, where do you get your crazy ideas? What name do you write under? Why don't you write up this great SF plot of mine into a novel and we'll split the royalties? Can you tell me the secret of getting published?

OK. In the post-war austerity of the 1950s, as all Europe still groaned under its immense hangover and a million SF writers were still busily erasing "radium gun" from their manuscripts and inserting "atomic blaster"... a child was born. It was without the faintest inkling of his awesome literary destiny that the youthful David Langford first took hold of a crayon and began to glimpse the mind-enhancing possibilities of sticking it up his nose. Soon, with strange precocity...

This fills me with strange nausea. Can we talk about the book a bit now? Preferably — for space reasons — without mentioning the title.

The title has been brilliantly lifted from a critical speech-cum-essay I put together in 1984, and of course you will deduce that this significantly titled piece has a prominent place in the book.

Of course.

You'd be wrong. Rog Peyton (who with his Andromeda Book Co partner Rod Milner *is* Drunken Dragon Press) desperately seized on this name when he realised I was never going to think of a good one. The second choice was "Sex Pirates of the Blood Asteroid", being the title of a Smithian space-operatic spoof I also published years ago, and which is also not featured in the book.

Ah, but I see you have a supposed Doc Smith parody here, featuring Cosmic Agent Mac Malsenn, whose last name looks suspiciously like an anagram.

You can't trust these anagrams. The fanzine title I stole from Ursula LeGuin, *Ansible*, turned out to be booby-trapped — it rearranges as "lesbian". As for Mac Malsenn, he started as a parodic Lensman in a very early and never to be reprinted tale called "Scourge of Space", but by his fourth or fifth story Malsenn was being used to poke fun at all sorts of supertechnological, universe-busting SF written in the *Analog* or post-*Analog* mode. You know, the sort of story that's based on a daft speculation reported in *New Scientist* and has to be written and published in about five minutes before the notion is hastily evicted from the austere mansions of respectable physics.

Aha. I suspect some of the other pieces in Dragonhiker *are generalised parodies too — the Brothers Grimm skit is about the whole fairy tale tradition, the horror novel extract is ripping (as it were) the guts out of the raw-liver chainsaw-subtlety trend rather than any particular author, and this one called "Jellyfish" —*

If you want to get technical, that's a pastiche rather than a parody — I wasn't sticking barbs into Damon Runyon's unique Broadway style, just revelling in it and wondering what a straight SF/Fantasy story by Runyon would be like.

Any regretted omissions?

I'm saving a few authors for a possible second collection, which *will* probably be called *Sex Pirates etc.* The present book? In the blinding clarity of hindsight, I wish I'd dwelt on the sort of grotty moral instruction Piers Anthony keeps shoving in — you know, one of his dimwitted but ever so worthy heroes debating whether it was wicked and deceitful to disguise himself as a tree when the horde of invincible bogeymen was after him, and deciding that henceforth he will practise no more such immoral deceptions. And I half-wish I'd extracted the Anne McCaffrey piece from its niche in the introduction and let it go on and on and on like her later novels, with hundreds more names of characters and drunken dragons who are barely relevant to the plot.

Drunken dragons... is that where the press name comes from?

Put it down to synchronicity. Drunken Dragon Press Ltd (the "drunken" is a real breakthrough, being one of the words supposedly forbidden in a British company name) came into being with a loud *spung!* before I'd finalised that brief skit, whose lack of dragon sobriety seemed independently inevitable...

Speaking of insobriety (this is a highly contrived link of the sort we interviewers put in for the sake of something laughingly called continuity), I notice that many of the stories feature bars or pubs, even the Moorcock spoof "The Mad Gods' Omelette".

Ah yes, I can see you inserted that highly contrived link to lead up to my totally out-of-context remark that

"Omelette" was very nearly published in *New Worlds Quarterly*. Hilary Bailey and (I think) Charles Platt persuaded me to shorten it and make it funnier, and I was all set to leap aboard the *New Worlds* bandwagon to become a New Wave writer with lots of sex, drugs and entropy, when *NWQ* folded. Instead I had to wait years and years for cyberpunk — sex, drugs and RS-232 communications interface protocol.

Hey, how about a cyberpunk parody?

Maybe next book. I toyed with the idea of a Bill Gibson heroic fantasy, and got as far as the first sentence: "The sky above the Dark Tower was the colour of a crystal ball, tuned to a dead etheric plane." Then for some reason I hid under the bed.

Speaking of non-sequiturs, how come you chose to spoof an Asimov detective story rather than his SF?

John Sladek's already done a hilariously cruel assault on the Laws of Robotics, in *The Steam-Driven Boy...* and I had a little fun with them myself in "Sex Pirates". As well as being fresh ground, Asimov's later detective tales are prone to a kind of agonizing, ponderous triviality which seemed ripe for leg-pulling. Likewise those endless, static Frank Herbert scenes where every meaningful twitch of a nostril is analysed in pages of involuted subtlety and *sotto voce* italics.

But you don't pull James White's leg too cruelly in the "Sector General" parody, which is very nearly a straight story...

My liking for James and that series is fairly evident, yes. Besides, he's bigger than me.

Whereas your liking for AE van Vogt isn't. What's all this in the acknowledgements about that piece being a former collaboration — whatever that might be?

It's a longish story, dating back to my days with the Oxford University SF Group. In the 1970s, OUSFG stalwart Allan Scott and I drunkenly agreed that we should collaborate on a parody of van Vogt's *Null-A* books. There were all sorts of exciting technical constraints, like the new scene, plot device or man coming in with a gun every 800 words, the totally irrelevant quotations at the heads of chapters, the astounding bits of super-science which for true authenticity must all be inconsistent with each other, the hero's development of unlimited super powers while he remains incredibly slow on the uptake, and the all-important need for a tale of rattling excitement which never actually quite makes sense.

That doesn't extend to van Vogt's third and much later effort Null-A Three, *which by way of exciting novelty has a stupefyingly tedious and rambling plot which never so much as threatens to make sense.*

Quite... I made notes on all sorts of other important statistics from *The World of Null-A*, such as the remarkable number of times its hero Gilbert Gosseyn, when not making "cortico-thalamic pauses" (don't ask), was either bound and gagged, or compelled for excellent plot reasons to bind and gag other people. Ever wondered about the formative SF influences of John Norman? Allan's equivalent research consisted of listening to old Goon Show recordings and stealing the jokes. We wrote alternate scenes of this world-shaking literary critique, and the result was decidedly odd, partly because AE van Vogt has never been *quite* as funny as Spike Milligan, and partly because (and this is a pitfall about which I warn all would-be parodists) Allan hadn't actually read *The World of Null-A*.

So this thing did get finished as a collaboration.

Yes, but time passed. Continents rose and fell, the universe dwindled towards its heat death, and I moved house. When I eventually tried to reconstruct the van Vogt spoof from a rubble of bygone civilisations and cardboard boxes, I could only find copies of *my* scenes. This immediately led to another useful bit of wisdom for van Vogt parodists. After constructing a chaotic but vaguely connected story in our author's inimitable manner, it will be made ever so much more convincing if you then go through and cross out every other scene.

Especially, perhaps, the ones full of old Goon Show jokes?

No comment. After long minutes of revision, I ended up with what appears in *Dragonhiker*. (Also, of course, with a death threat from Allan.) In homage to the second title in van Vogt's series, *The Pawns of Null-A*, it's called "The Spawn of Non-Q". Be warned: just as John W Campbell used to warn people, the morning after you've finished "Spawn" its hidden truths will reach critical mass in your forebrain and convey the dazzling, universe-busting inner meaning, which will be that you have a hangover.

That's quite enough. Have you considered turning your stupendous literary genius to parodying other SF forms? You do break briefly into Lewis Carroll-style verse in Dragonhiker, *but it strikes me that such astonishing brilliance as yours could also parody non-fictional clichés like the sycophantic author-interview...*

Please accept this huge bottle of single-malt whisky as a grateful tribute to your brilliant interviewing skills, and change the subject.

Er... Thank you, David Langford!

GAVIN RALF-DODD

The Dragonhiker's Guide to Battlefield Covenant at Dune's Edge: Odyssey Two **is published by Drunken Dragon Press at £9.95 in hardback. There is also a super luxury edition at a price which the author is embarrassed to mention. In both editions, the blurb quotations from HG Wells, Jules Verne, L Ron Hubbard and Stanislaw Lem, and likewise the guest introduction by Harlan Ellison, are thought to lack authenticity.**

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...AND PASS THE AMMUNITION

ALEX STEWART

HOW MUCH INFLUENCE REVIEWERS REALLY HAVE ON THE success of a book is debatable; readers addicted to badly novelised D&D scenarios, for instance, will fork out their money for *Spell of the Dragonsword*, or *Sword of the Spelldragon*, or whatever this week's subliterate deployment of cosily familiar cliché happens to be called, irrespective of either its literary merits or anything the hard-pressed reviewer might have to say about it. For some readers, negative reviews from the right source might even be a positive recommendation; *The Wasp Factory* probably wouldn't have had half its initial impact without all those vitriolic comments so gleefully quoted on the cover of the paperback edition.

But one review really is critical, literally making or breaking the book, and that's the one the public never gets to see. A mass-market publisher gets at least fifty submissions a month, often more, adding maybe two or three new titles to their list during that time. Somewhere along the line they have to be culled, whittled down to a number the editors can actually deal with; and that's where the readers come in.

The publishers' readers are the mercenary shock troops of the industry, picking off the advancing tide of submissions like machine gunners mowing down an infantry charge in the mud of the Somme. The carnage is brutal, and survivors few. That so many of them are of the quality of *Dragon of the Spellsword* speaks for itself; trust me, gentle reader, you really don't want to know how unspeakably bad the rest can be.

When a parcel arrives from the publisher, the eager reader begins the process of triage; otherwise known as saving the most promising for last, as a psychological bribe ("only one more bloody space marines book, then I can read the good stuff"), or moving the most mindless-looking to the bottom of the stack (anything with "Dragon", "Sword" or "Spell" in the title, a map in the front, or an author bio mentioning a day job with TSR). Other pointers in the triage process are the covering letters from agents (a good, well-known agency usually means a good, readable author; a less exalted one an unreadable hack), and the condition of the pages and spine when the actual American edition of a book turns up. Dog-eared pages and a cracked spine mean every other publisher in London's turned this one down already; this fact is probably significant. I got one recently that, judging by the condition and the copyright date, had been circulating since 1980. It only took a few pages to realise why.

So what makes it through the net? More to the point, what do readers look for in a book that makes them actively enthuse about it when they pass it on to someone further up the decision-making process, instead of just reaching for another body bag?

By and large, it's the same sort of thing we look for when we do a magazine review, or in a published work we've shelled out some of our own money for. Good writing, well rounded characters, a well constructed and skilfully paced plot, that sort of thing. Something that usually means a swift thumbs down from me is blatant silliness of the sort perpetrated by the author of the novel which, for the sake of decency, will be referred to hereafter simply as The Only Book So Bad I Got Paid A Bonus For Reading It.

The Only Book had all the hallmarks of something stunningly awful even at the triage stage; a ten page synopsis of the following projected eight volumes, another two or three pages of the author explaining how *The Only Book* was so much better than all this down-market Science Fiction stuff it superficially resembled, because it was based on mythic images and was therefore Great Literature, and a note to the effect that it was only a first draft and could probably be changed entirely if there was more money in that. Submissions from the agency handling this monumental work of Great Literature, I later discovered to my immense lack of surprise, get a lower priority in at least one publishing house than the stuff in the unsolicited slushpile.

Needless to say, *The Only Book* turned out to be 800 pages of mind-buggering tedium. Typical of its deep understanding of the universe we live in was the author's contention that Hell is at the centre of the galaxy; all the stars are closer together there, you see, so it's much hotter, so the baddies all suffer from perpetual sunburn. (Despite ten million years of technological progress, apparently, the development of Ambre Solaire had eluded them).

The well-worn path to the Tomb of the Unknown Novel has been trodden by countless feet apart from would-be authors of Great Literature. Among the most frequently interred there, at least by British publishers, is the American Redneck Paranoia Power Fantasy. Details of this one vary, but the plot is always the same. The good ol' US of A is threatened by commie liberal fellow-travelling pinko faggot scumbags, or towelhead camel-fucking Eyeranian fundamentalist scumbags, who want to pull the plug on the totally wonderful Star Wars project, and only one good ol' red-blooded American patriotic hero can battle through tremendous odds to foil them. He eventually succeeds, upholding all the true American values, like gunning down anyone who disagrees with him, and raping any women who happen to cross his path. The "science" is usually given in great expository chunks of technobabble, ripped bleeding from *Omni* editorials about the space shuttle; you know, the ones full of phrases like "manifest destiny." All this is dropped into the plot in indigestible lumps, so the author can get it out of the way quickly and back to the important stuff, like rape and murder.

Closely allied to this is the space marine novel, which is pretty much the same, only in space, and with slimy alien scumbags standing in for the knee-jerk hate objects of redneck America. After a couple of these you begin to long for the impeccable liberal sensibilities of Heinlein's *Starship Troopers*.

And then there are those identikit fantasy trilogies with maps in the front, in which absolutely nothing happens at immense length, and where everyone speaks in most a manner strange, as though not understand they syntax the meaning of.

Of course not everything is as bad as these horrid archetypes. The vast majority are simply adequate, the literary equivalent of an MFI coffee table, shunted aside to continue their lonely odyssey around the publishers' offices by the pressure of the marginally better stuff behind them.

What makes the job bearable is the one book in twenty that shines out from the rest. The one book in twenty that dissects the human condition with a scalpel of wit, presenting characters you care about and feel for. The one book in twenty you write your report on fizzing with enthusiasm, urging your editor to buy.

Then, in the next parcel, there's a letter agreeing with your assessment, telling you how much everyone in the office enjoyed the book too, but pointing out regretfully that there's no market for this sort of thing. And besides, they've just blown their budget on a Piers Anthony trilogy.

It's called *Sword of the Dragonspell*, and it's got maps in the front.

BOOK REVIEWS

Edited by Paul Kincaid

MYTHIC BEASTS - Isaac Asimov, Martin H. Greenberg & Charles G. Waugh (Eds) [Robinson, 1988, 343pp, £3.50]
FANTASY ALL-TIME GREATS - Robert Silverberg & Martin H. Greenberg (Eds) [Robinson, 1988, 431pp, £4.95]
Reviewed by Terry Broome

FANTASY ALL-TIME GREATS WAS FIRST published in the US as *The Fantasy Hall of Fame* and its 22 stories were picked by vote at the 1981 and 1982 World Fantasy Conventions. It contains stories from four series: Vance's "Mazirian the Magician" from the Dying Earth saga; Jirel of Joiry in "Black God's Kiss" by C.L. Moore; Bradbury's "Homecoming" featuring his family of supernaturals (including vampires); and Moorcock's Elric story, "Kings in Darkness". There are three fairy tales and four whimsical stories - the best is L. Sprague De Camp's delightful "Nothing in the Rules", about a mermaid entered in a swimming contest. Of the remainder, the excellent ones are Poe's "The Masque of the Red Death", A. Merritt's "The Women of the Wood", and Ursula LeGuin's ambiguous utopia, "The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas", a powerful tale of moral dilemma.

LeGuin's is the only story written after the 1960s, and the majority are from the 30 years preceding 1956, suggesting that either the following 27 years were very disappointing for fantasy fans, or that most of those who voted were only commonly familiar with the older stories.

Mythic Beasts contains 13 stories, four of which are from the 1980s. It shares with the other anthology a preference for whimsy and fairy tales, duplicating Sturgeon's excellent "The Silken Swift". Vance also reappears, with his novella "Kragen" about a revolution among a sea-borne society who are preyed upon by kraken-like monsters. Hans Christian Anderson's "The Little Mermaid" is one of the best stories in this anthology; one of the worst is Edward D. Hoch's previously unpublished tale of centaurs playing baseball, "Centaur Fielder for the Yankies". De Camp's story uses the idea of mythical creatures playing competitive sport more frivolously and with more finesse than Hoch's very quaint, very American effort.

Of greater sophistication are George R.R. Martin's deeply allegorical "The Ice Dragon", and Tanith Lee's subtle account of an inquisitive writer turned to stone in "The Gorgon".

Robinson are in the business of reprint anthologies and *Fantasy All-Time Greats* gives a very good quality return for the price. *Mythic Beasts* is not as impressive, despite its more recent stories, but notes on the origins of the myths are in its favour.

ARC OF THE DREAM - A.A. Attanasio [Grafton, 1988, 335pp, £3.95]
Reviewed by Jim England

I MAY BE WRONG, BUT I THINK THIS IS cyberpunk. A punk comes into it. So does an orc. Also an old, hyperactive Asian man, a schizophrenic Parisian girl, a gambling American, and the Arc of the title: a creature from 5-space called Insideout who is trying to get back in to where it came from in the Big Bang, who ropes in the other protagonists to help it.

Gone are the days, it seems, when SF writers were advised to start with a fairly ordinary situation before launching into stuff requiring suspension of disbelief. Attanasio starts off with about 15 pages of enough pseudo-scientific talk of hypertubules, neutron spin, tesseracts and titanohaematite to put off all but the most hardened SF readers. For good measure, an appendix is added with a few equations (I recommend Stephen Hawking's *A Short History of Time* to anyone who wants more).

The main character, Dirk, an Hawaiian punk whose father fought in 'Nam (and whose ghost appears) has been a tearaway since the age of six when he was caught selling drugs to prostitutes. As an adolescent he has an odour of wet sawdust and is adept at dirty fighting. He nevertheless turns out to have a heart of gold. The novel is action packed and probably written by someone alert to the possibility of it being made into a film with colourful special effects. Roger Zelazny describes it as "a potent piece of storytelling pulsing with menace", and Norman Spinrad says it "melds physics and metaphysics, adventure and speculation". Neither mentions the humour, which is considerable.

The author's imagination is very visual. His prose is sometimes sickly with metaphors but often enriched by them. (He excels in descriptions of the sky.) I have no doubt he's a major SF writer; the publishers mention a previous novel, *Radix*, which I shall look out for. I would not have missed this. It shows that there are no rules for novel writing. Attanasio pulls out all the stops, his style has to be seen to be believed.

One final thing. From my reading of the book the publishers are wrong to say on the cover that it describes "a visionary quest to save the Earth from total destruction". Something the size of Hawaii is not the Earth.

IN ALIEN FLESH - Gregory Benford [Gollancz, 1988, 280pp, £11.95]
Reviewed by John Gribbin

THIS COLLECTION IS ONE FOR THE CONNoisseur. It will probably be much discussed during American college courses on modern literature. But it doesn't represent either Benford or the genre at their best. It is good, journeyman SF, workmanlike rather than inspired.

The problem is that Benford is a working physicist. So the science in his best books (eg *Timescape*) is good, but his writing has to be done in spare moments. One of the stories here was actually dictated on the run into a tape recorder, and typed up by an agency (not a luxury most struggling SF writers can afford). So, all too often, he tosses away a good idea in a story far too short to do it justice.

The exceptions prove the rule. When he gives himself room, as in "To the Storming Gulf", a post-holocaust story paying homage to the American south of Benford's boyhood, he shows how well he can write. In a short-short like "Nooncoming", which might have pre-Gibsoned Gibson if he'd let it grow, Benford leaves you frustrated and wanting more. This feeling of being short-changed is not eased by an Afterword in which he explains at length how he really was trying to write in an ultra-compact style that day.

The Afterwords are a feature of the book that will make it even more appealing to students of SF. They tell you roughly when, where, and why each story was written. And they show you an author consciously struggling to find a style, trying a little bit of William Faulkner and a smidgeon of *The New Yorker* to see what fits. You can find bits and pieces of ideas, as well as styles, that later cropped up in novels, and a curious story, "Relativistic Effects", which reads like a rip-

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THE DRAGONHIKER'S GUIDE TO BATTLEFIELD COVENANT AT DUNE'S EDGE: ODYSSEY TWO

David Langford

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B O O K S

off of Poul Anderson's *Tau Zero*, but after which Benford assures us he had not "consciously remembered that work anytime during the process" of writing this story. (This is the same excuse which didn't help George Harrison when sued for plagiarism by the owners of the copyright on "He's So Fine".)

Most of all, *In Alien Flesh* will appeal to the aspiring writer in all of us. It shows how a good scientist can turn himself into a competent writer. Even if we aren't all as good at science as Benford, we can learn a lot from his example. Watch out for a rash of SF shorts using *New Yorker* tricks and Faulkner idioms.

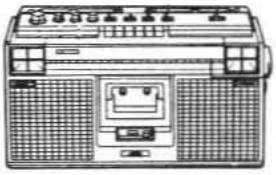
SCUDDER'S GAME - D.G. Compton
[Kerosina, 1988, 175pp, £12.95, Collector's Edition £35]
Reviewed by Helen McNabb

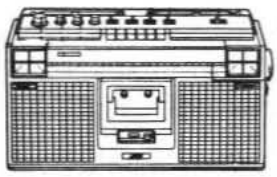
ONE THOUGHT FLOATED INTO MY MIND AS I read this book: why had Compton made it SF? Could it not equally well have been a non-genre novel? *Is* this a question a committed skiffy reader/reviewer should allow to linger? Yes it is. Science fiction ought, at best, to have all the elements of a good mainstream novel with all the scope, imagination and excitement that SF has to offer. Bad SF sometimes has imagination but lacks basic characterisation, getting away with it only because someone enjoys the central idea, no matter how often used or how badly expressed. This book provokes the query because it is basically a character study which, through the central figure, Pete Laznett, explores his relationship with his parents and their relationship with each other. This does not require any science fictional elements. It would have been possible to have added such elements as window dressing (the cowboys in space touch) but Compton has not. Instead he has written a novel.

Laznett lives in a near, near-idyllic future, a society where the Cordwainer and Straub device has coupled birth control with sexual pleasure bringing a drastic fall in the birth rate, and automation has freed people from working all the time. Free time is often spent in the Games, like the commodity market or transport which were once done for real and are here done for fun and excitement. The likelihood of free, safe, easy and glorious sex in our society which is building walls against the fears of AIDS is not relevant to the story, any more than the probability of any SF scenario coming to pass, though a critic seemed to believe it was a demerit of the book that the society Compton presents is unlikely to occur. After all, the F does stand for *Fiction*. Which is not to say that fiction cannot and does not have something real and meaningful to say about our society or any other society. It has. Does the book create a believable world? Does it maintain interest? Do the characters act in a believable way? Can they have existed before and after the events in the novel? These are the points that matter. To judge on these points this book is successful.

Laznett is a selfish, thoughtless, immature, well-meaning man who never understood his parents. His first visit to them in 17 years is told in the novel. His misconceptions, his misunderstandings, his belated realisation of the love people have for each other build a story which is gripping, eloquent and ... On second thoughts I won't give a conclusion because the word I was going to use gives too much away.

It is an intelligent book, perhaps for thoughtful readers who don't need too much razzamatazz to attract their attention.





RADIO PLAYS - D.G. Compton
[Kerosina, 1988, 62pp]
Reviewed by K.V. Bailey

D.G. COMPTON SAYS IN HIS INTRODUCTION that he "dared propose" this volume to Kerosina as being not "a mere arcane artefact", but something that "might even be a fun read." It certainly is: albeit a fun tempered by astringency. The two plays, though resurrected from before his SF novels, are prognostic of them. The radio play in written form, he claims, allows easier visualising than stage or TV texts. Perhaps true; yet much imaginative effort must go into reading scripts where settings and directions can only be acoustically signalled. As for images, his dog howling, train whistling and chromatic scales evoke aural memories chiefly. Essential visual images, such as the pivotal photograph in *Time Exposure*, are built from descriptive and allusive speech-fragments. Imagery aside, what the medium most characteristically encourages is freedom of play with time and consciousness; and in exercising this Compton excels.

Certain clichéd tags are useful for works on the borders of psychological fantasy and realism. While recognising the true originality of the plays and their distinctive humour I'd tag *A Turning off the Minch Park Road* "Kafkaesque", and *Time Exposure* "Pinteresque". The former explores confusions and mergings of identity and locale induced by suburban uniformity - the "little man" trapped as in a maze by the coincidences and contingencies of habit and environment. The latter has a dimension of fantasy in which time and sounds and dialogue reel backwards and forwards. Its dramatic focus is the interpretation of a photograph encapsulating the subjectively cyclic moment about which two frustrated lives have hinged. At the heart of each serio-comic piece lie perennial questions about the nature of "the real" and "the perceived". You think while you read and laugh.

NICK AND THE GLIMMUNG - Philip K. Dick
(illustrated by Paul Demeyer)
[Gollancz, 1988, 141pp, £7.95]
Reviewed by Paul Kincaid

IN THE MID-60s DICK WAS AT THE HEIGHT of his powers. A succession of superb novels streamed out, including many of his best: *Martian Time-Slip*, *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch*, *Now Wait for Last Year*, *The Zap Gun*, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep*. It was in this period of frenzied activity that he wrote his one children's book, now in print for the first time.

It is obvious that he was not at ease writing for children. The book is very uneven, one moment too simple even for a pre-teen audience, the next expressing typically Dickian concepts that would leave even the sophisticated "young adult" of today floundering. He has barely had to adjust his natural writing style, the simple language and flat manner suit his audience perfectly. But this clearly has its drawbacks as the author became engrossed in what must have felt like just another book, and lost track of who he was writing for.

And that, of course, is precisely what makes this such a fascinating and delightful find. It belongs squarely among all those other books of the 60s, full of the familiar obsessions and perceptions.

In an over-populated future, the pressures mean that no pets are allowed. At one point robot pets are suggested in passing, as though Dick was already shaping his thoughts for *Do Androids* ... But no-one familiar with his work could doubt that reality is preferable to illusion, flesh and blood to simulacra, and when Nick's pet cat is discovered the family has no alternative but to emigrate to Plowman's Planet. There they encounter a whole menagerie of typically Dickian weird creatures, many of them, like Wubs, already familiar. And there Nick must combat the mighty Glimmung that has sown dissent in this once peaceful land. It is a simple tale, but within it Dick has managed to weave complex ideas and unexpected perceptions. It may not be vintage, but it's certainly more than just one for the collectors.

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MONA LISA OVERDRIVE - William Gibson
[Gollancz, 1988, 251pp, £10.95]
Reviewed by Paul Kincaid

IT'S ALL HERE, EVERYTHING YOU'VE always thought belongs in a cyberpunk novel. Adventures in cyberspace; characters who are plugged in; brand names for everything and everything labelled with its brand; all powerful corporations; Japanese cultural references; city sleeze; and a crime story to tie it all together. William Gibson's third and final novel in his cyberspace sequence is very much more of the same. The first two novels charted a vivid and believable future, illuminated by the elegant fantasy of cyberspace. But by *Count Zero* there was little really original to raise it to the level of *Neuromancer*, and even more than that *Mona Lisa Overdrive* feels like a return to overly familiar territory. Nothing surprises us. We know enough about the morality and the technology of this world that when the sad prostitute Mona is described as looking like the Sense/Net star Angie Mitchell we expect dirty work and substitution. The mystery is why, given the technology that rebuilt Turner one book and several years before, they needed that physical similarity in the first place. We know that when a comatose body loosely identified as The Count and plugged into this amazing matrix is delivered for safe keeping into the hands of Slick Henry the solution to the mystery lies with the loas and other denizens of cyberspace. With the final part of a sequence such as this the motivation is to tie off loose ends and explain; but there was enough in the other books for us to understand what was going on, the loose ends didn't need to be tied, cyberspace didn't need to be explained. Nothing really new is introduced in this novel, so that the only thing to sustain it as a book is the plot, and the writing. The writing is as good as anything else Gibson has done, if not better. There are passages, particularly dealing with the Japanese girl Kumiko, that knock the whole of *Neuromancer* and *Count Zero* into a cocked hat. Gibson is, at last, demonstrating that he can ring the changes on tone and nuance, use the language to powerful effect. As for the plot, we get the familiar device of four stories unrolling in parallel and only coming together at the end of the book - even structurally it is a close mirror of its predecessor. Unfortunately the improvement in the writing has robbed it of some of its narrative drive, so that though there are battles and bodies galore, the story does not rush ahead with the same remorselessness. All of which is not to say that this is a bad book. If, somehow, you have avoided all contact with cyberpunk up to now then you are in for a very exciting bit of science fiction. And if you want the familiarity of revisiting the Swarm, then you can be safely assured that you will enjoy this book. But if *Neuromancer* broke new ground, and *Count Zero* excavated it further, then *Mona Lisa Overdrive* just jumps into the same hole, now about the size of a grave. Gibson has incredible talent, he displays it here, but he does not stretch it. We will not see a flowering of that talent until he dares to head off in a new direction.

THE LIVES OF CHRISTOPHER CHANT - Diana Wynne Jones
[Methuen, 1988, 252pp, £8.95]
Reviewed by Maureen Porter

ONE OF THE MOST ATTRACTIVE QUALITIES of Diana Wynne Jones' work is its matter-of-factness. The existence of magic is not commented upon for much of the time, the assumption being that everywhere is like this, surely. It is perfectly normal for every second person to be a witch, and eminently sensible that there should be a government department specifically dedicated to regulating the use of witchcraft. That she then proceeds to poke fun at the ministry she has created is typical of the author's skewed sense of humour. Much of her work is imbued with a gentle comedy, most apparent when she shifts to a matter of deadly seriousness, an approach that has brought her many fans, myself included. I am pleased to report that her latest novel, *The Lives of Christopher Chant*, has brought these twin qualities to a new peak.

The subtitle, The Childhood of Chrestomanci, gives the clue that we are back in familiar territory, dealing with the boyhood of the character who has become popular through his appearances in *The Magicians of Caprona*, *Witch Week*, and notably, *Charmed Life*. The young Christopher, more or less ignored by his parents, finds refuge in his dreams, travelling to strange worlds before his activities are discovered, and unexpectedly encouraged by his uncle. When the true extent of his magical talents and his nine lives are revealed, he becomes the ward of Chrestomanci, the chief among witches and magicians, to be groomed for the rôle when he is older. But his education is complicated by a protracted hunt for a mysterious smuggler, and his friendship with a Living Goddess.

This apparent farrago of nonsense is handled with consummate mastery by Ms Wynne Jones, as she balances the absurd with the serious. Thus Asheth the Living Goddess must escape impending death, but wants to seek refuge in a girls' boarding school. And Christopher's magical ability is only fully realised when he removes the silver brace from his teeth, silver being the one thing which impedes his power. It says much for the author's skill that this does make perfect sense and seem entirely rational.

Apart from revealing the extraordinary details of Chrestomanci's childhood, the Twelve Related Worlds are fully described, their existence having only been hinted at in previous books. It is to be hoped that we will return to these worlds in a future book, although I think we can safely expect not quite more of the same.

THE BOOK OF THE DAMNED - Tanith Lee (229pp)
THE BOOK OF THE BEAST - Tanith Lee (196pp)
[Unwin, 1988, £6.95 each]
Reviewed by Mike Christie

TANITH LEE'S TWO NEW BOOKS SHARE THE city of Paradys, a colourful town somewhere vaguely in Europe. The time is similarly undefined - it may be our past, or the present of a parallel, but very similar, world. The characters, however, will be familiar to Lee's readers: flamboyant, hot-blooded, and exotic, with a habit of becoming involved with the supernatural.

The first book contains three stories, with only Paradys in common. As stories they work reasonably well, although Lee's prose occasionally sags under the weight of occult significance; but in all three she uses an approach to fantasy story-telling familiar from her Flat Earth books. She takes a mythological being, a god, vampire or demon, and tells of its adventures among humans. The tale is told from the viewpoint of one or more of those humans, but they're no more than supporting actors for the supernatural star. There's no denying the sense of climax that accompanies the final revealing of the mystery of each story - here's the point, she seems to be saying, here is what you were waiting for. As a result the stories are like occult detective novels with no detective.

The second, however, follows one student's tangles with a demon throughout the book to a final death-or-marriage showdown. But even here Lee dilutes the human story by insisting on two extended flashbacks to previous victims of the demon. This is supposed to give us a feeling for the ancient evil the demon represents, and the importance of finally exorcising it, but the lack of focus on any of the humans involved means we don't really care what the demon does to them. The demon's own history is much more interesting and we get a lot of that, but when Lee gets round to knocking it off it's hard to care. The student victim, presumably meant to

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hold the reader's sympathy in the climactic exorcism, is on stage for less than 60 pages out of nearly 200.

Lee's characters occupy the positions in the story that heros, heroines, villains and sidekicks always occupy, and are kitted out with nasty dialogue or physical beauty as appropriate. Lee is more interested in the curses she can inflict on them, and the reader's interest will likewise depend on his or her liking for weird events, rather than on the storytelling ability which Lee possesses, but which seems to be temporarily in hiding.

THE FIFTH CHILD - Doris Lessing
[Cape, 1988, 133pp, £9.95]
Reviewed by Neale Vickery & Martyn Tayor

ALTHOUGH THE BLURB DESCRIBES LESSING'S new novel as a "contemporary horror story", it is certainly not one in the accepted sense. It obeys none of the conventions and ends not in a dramatic climax but a dispiriting trailing away. It is, though, a disturbing and pessimistic account of society's inability to cope with the alien, with anything that refuses to conform to civilisation's expectations.

David and Harriet Lovatt opt out of the hedonistic 60's to recreate the archetypal English extended family. They seem to succeed, with four healthy children and a rambling house. Then Ben, the Fifth Child, arrives.

Unplanned, unwanted, the pregnancy is difficult. Within 18 months he has sprained his brother's arm, strangled a dog and killed the family cat. In desperation he is packed off to an institution, but Harriet, guilty at this abdication of responsibility, fetches him home. Under the pressure of the alien in their midst the family collapses. As he grows up (a process described with admirable economy) Ben finds his niche and even an element of leadership and authority among society's drop outs; while David and Harriet's dream of happiness lies in ruins.

It is tempting to see an allegory for the inability of bourgeois, civilised values to respond to the animal within man, or the alien in society; or even for the degenerate state of Thatcher's Britain. Lessing claims simply to have placed an "alien" in a contemporary environment and played out the resulting conflict, though I think she is being disingenuous. Ben isn't inherently evil, just an accidental resurfacing of the neanderthal in our genes. He becomes the unwitting victim of a society which cannot cope with his uncompromising "otherness". A pessimistic conclusion at variance with the optimism of her previous works.

She leaves the end of this short novel open. We don't find out what becomes of Ben, David or Harriet; more seriously, we don't really care. For me, this book failed on an emotional level, I could find no sympathy for any of the characters. The book is chilling rather than horrific, but the chill is strictly cerebral. Lessing's fans will find much that is familiar here, but they will also find a new tone, a pessimism which provides the only true horror in the book. [NV]

DAVID AND HARRIET ARE LONERS COME together to buy a huge country house with the express intent of filling it with children. David's rich father pays the bills, Harriet's harassed mother helps with the yearly child and the endless, immense family parties. Then nemesis arrives in Ben. He isn't normal. He isn't nice. He's violent. Unable to cope, the family consign him to a freak's hideaway where the uniform is a strait jacket and the food Largactil. But Harriet's conscience is stirred and she rescues him, bringing him home. After all, there's bound to be someone around to help ...

Lessing's earlier books were marvellous evocations of real people working through real difficulties. Of late she has lost patience. All are horrid and irredeemable, which is fine as a philosophy until it affects the structure of the fiction. In this brief novel every character, every situation exists only to be inevitably knocked down. She allows us no sympathy for the incorrigibly selfish and irresponsible David and Harriet, or the relations who indulge them.

The Fifth Child is too short for any exploration. There is no description, no possibility of doubt. Which would be fine if Lessing had a firm grip on the society she so witheringly despises, but she doesn't. She affects to despise the ignorant, the lazy and the self indulgent. Those failings abound in this book. We in the SF community are used to our grand old masters writing garbage in their old age. Perhaps it is appropriate, therefore, that it falls to an SF critic to say that this is a bad, nasty little book, wholly unworthy of one of the best writers alive today. [MT]

EMPIRE DREAMS - Ian McDonald
[Bantam, 1988, 220pp, $3.50]
Reviewed by Martin Waller

IAN McDONALD IS AN ODDITY, A YOUNG British writer who has made a success of selling his stories to the American magazines. This varied collection of 10 short stories gives a good indication why, and could provide some tips for other aspiring writers.

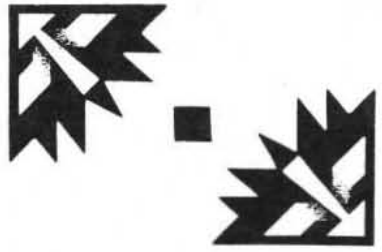
Four of the stories first appeared in *Isaac Asimov's SF Magazine*, an immediate pointer to his style, and they aren't half bad either. The title story deals with a young boy's recovery from leukemia, tied in with his unwillingness to accept the death of his father at the hands of terrorists. Both it and "Vivaldi", about a probe to the outer reaches of the solar system and the death and subsequent unpleasant artificial resurrection of a much loved daughter, show traces of the sentimentality which I chauvinistically assume must have commended his work to the US market.

"Scenes from a Shadowplay" takes him into M. John Harrison territory, with a murder among the decayed aristocrats of a future world city. McDonald regularly displays an eye for a telling image, not least in the dire revenge taken by his protagonist on one he thinks has slighted him.

The collection also contains a couple of bows to Silverberg - a man visits his dead wife held in computer simulation on "The Island of the Dead", and a doomed love and drugs story between a draft-dodging exile and a girl living at accelerated speed in "Radio Marrakech" - and there is a Borgesian exploration of unknown cities.

There are two stand-outs, however. In the pastiche "King of Morning, Queen of Day", a turn-of-the-century Irish scientist detects an expedition from outer space. His daughter is, to his disgust, drawn into the world of the Fairy People, the whole phenomenon being the product of her awakening adolescent sexuality. "Catherine Wheel" is set on a bizarre but well-visualised terraformed Mars, featuring the last journey of a giant steam train. Both stories display his descriptive powers at their best, the opening of "Catherine" in particular being something of a masterpiece.

McDonald's clearest reference points are American writers of the 1960s, such as Zelazny, Delany and Silverberg, but he has a power of his own to twist established themes into something different and strange. In these times we should give thanks for small mercies, and for the emergence of a new British writer of promise.



THE FEMALE POPE - Rosemary & Darroll Pardoe
[Crucible, 1988, 112pp, £8.95]
Reviewed by David V. Barrett

WHEN I FIRST READ LAWRENCE DURRELL'S *Pope Joan* (1954, trans from a 19th century Greek novel) I swore I'd one day write a novel to do justice to the wonderful myth, as Durrell's dull rendering fails to do. If I ever do, one of my major sources will be this detailed study of the historical records.

The basic myth is: a 9th century English or German woman became Pope, but after 2½ years unexpectedly gave birth in the middle of a procession in

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Rome and, in most versions, died or was killed for her blasphemy. In some versions demons speak with her - or condemn her as she dies.

But is there any factual basis to the myth? The Pardoes argue not. I disagree, but their mainly meticulous research makes the book a delight to read, as well as a valuable text. They examine the authenticity of early texts; look at the argument over the centuries; make a fascinating though brief digression into a similar Byzantine myth, and another into women who have posed as monks; then take a quick look at Pope Joan in fiction and her influence on Tarot (The Papesse). But they fall into the trap of giving evidence for and against an argument, summarily dismissing half of it, then saying "The story ... was certainly a favourite one, but it was undoubtedly pure invention". The word "undoubtedly" is patently untrue, this is sloppy scholarship. I'm also surprised they refuse to accept that the Roman Catholic Church could ever rewrite history to present a more favourable aspect.

It's also unfortunate that they do not refer to Joan Morris's *Pope John VIII - an Englishwoman: alias Pope Joan* (Vrai, 1985). Morris, an authority on women in the church, argues repetitiously but convincingly, from much the same source material as the Pardoes, *for* the historicity of Pope Joan, placing her in 856-858 AD, after Benedict III, rather than in the usual position between Leo IV and Benedict, hence getting round many of the historical difficulties the Pardoes carefully examine. It is a matter of regret that the Pardoes completely miss her study.

Having said that, their book is far more interesting and better written and, despite its omissions and (I believe incorrect) conclusions, is a welcome contribution to the debate.

UNQUENCHABLE FIRE - Rachel Pollack
[Century, 1988, 390pp, £11.95 hardback, £5.95 paperback]
Reviewed by Barbara Davies

THIS BOOK IS HARD TO CATEGORISE. I would call it neither SF nor Fantasy, perhaps surrealism is nearer the mark. Rachel Pollack has previously written books on Salvador Dali and fortune-telling. These influences can be seen in *Unquenchable Fire*.

The plot is basically a straightforward tale of the nine months in Jennifer Mazdan's life between the conception and birth of her daughter Valerie. Valerie is a special baby, her conception is the result of a strange dream her mother had on the Day of Truth. The setting is Poughkeepsie in New York State, but this is an America where dreams, myths, miracles and ritual are an integral part of life. The Tellers, a mysterious group who tell the great myths to huge audiences and invoke weird occurrences, have become weak, disorganised and demoralised, as have their audiences. Some new powerful entity is needed to bring back the spirituality and purpose to life. It is while one such telling is taking place that Jennifer dreams her dream.

The narrative of Jennifer's life and that of her neighbours and relatives is interspersed with extracts from the myths told by the Tellers. These elliptical tales have relevance to the events that occur. It is through these myths and the strange miracles that happen around her that Jennifer tries to resolve her conflict between manipulation and free will.

The narrative is written in a readable and pacy style which encourages one to continue even when the story becomes somewhat confusing. The myth extracts, written in smaller type, have the ring of authenticity and lend the book a dreamlike quality; no mean feat considering that they are all created by the author. The scope of the plot may be limited, but there is a lot of substance to it which I would probably appreciate more on a second or third reading.

In short, *Unquenchable Fire* is an unusual but memorable book that would repay careful reading. Maybe not everybody's cup of tea though.

ARABESQUES - Ed. Susan Shwartz
[Avon, 1988, 258pp, $3.50]
Reviewed by Maureen Porter

IN RECENT YEARS *THE THOUSAND AND ONE NIGHTS* has exercised a great fascination for writers of fantasy. Seamus Cullen, Ian Dennis, and most notably Robert Irwin, spring to mind, although the quality of writing thus inspired has been variable. Susan Shwartz has now taken the idea of the framing story, and of tales told to pass the time, and used it as the raison d'être for this new anthology. It is certainly a most impressive assembly, by an equally impressive array of writers, including such luminaries as Tanith Lee, Gene Wolfe, Andre Norton and Larry Niven, as well as newer writers like Esther Friesner, Harry Turtledove and Judith Tarr. The stories maintain a consistently high standard, whilst ranging through the whole gamut of subjects you might expect from work inspired by the Arabian Nights. There are plenty of djinns, good and bad, and enough caliphs, princes and wazirs to keep anyone happy. Magic abounds, good inevitably triumphs over bad, but not all the stories are as simple and as straightforward as this would suggest. And there is some humour, Elizabeth Scarborough's *"The Elephant In-Law"* being a notable example. All in all, a satisfying collection which remains close to its inspiration yet at times rises far above it. A word of praise, also, for Susan Shwartz's excellent framing story, of the English knight sworn to remain for three years with an Arabian merchant as he waits for news of his ransom, and also for the publishers' intelligent provision of a basic bibliography touching on most aspects of Islamic culture.

AT WINTER'S END - Robert Silverberg
[Gollancz, 1988, 404pp, £11.95]
Reviewed by L.J. Hurst

THIS IS GOOD STUFF, A SEAMLESS MIXTure of SF and fantasy, the best work by Silverberg I've read. Set in the very far future, perhaps a million years from now. Earth has changed: devastated by seventy thousand years of meteorite showers, consequent dust hiding the sun, and long periods of glaciation. A small part of the planet is explored by a group of humans out of their cocoon for the first time since the meteors started falling. The leader is convinced that the winter is over and now is the foretold time to repossess the property of civilisations past. They discover a world nothing like the one that existed when their records ended, and that world which existed before the winter was nothing like the planet today. Earth had six native sentient species as well as visitors from space before the devastation, but the troop find many of them gone.

At Winter's End covers the first years out of the cocoon - it is an investigation of the new world and of the characters within the group. Evolution, mutation, manufacture have changed the world into a new biological wonder - more fantastic than scientific extrapolation could tolerate, a lot seems to be vermilion or blue furred, and while tentacled things writhe ubiquitously, sheep-like life has disappeared - but Silverberg clearly enjoys his descriptions.

The book is plotted in the sense that several discoveries, revelations and catastrophes move it along, can be foreseen and later have significance. The first big revelation, a quarter of the way through, came as a surprise and a pleasure in the way it was done. Several Silverberg themes reappear - the importance of intimacy and coupling, for instance, or the ruin of civilisations, but they are put to good use and are not simple repetitions. They have a role to play in the plotting.

Characterisation is better than the *Valentine* books, although I grew a little tired of Hresh the know-it-all kid who becomes shaman to the tribe. The rite of passage Hresh has to undergo seems overused.

I have not outlined the main story of the book and the troop's adventures. I will leave the pleasure of reading them to you. *At Winter's End* seemed good in almost every way.

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