

Vector

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The Critical Journal of the British Science Fiction Association

Brian Aldiss:
The Chinese Puzzle
Ramsey Campbell
Interviewed



Articles
Letters
Book Reviews

VECTOR

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- *Vector*, the BSFA journal
- *Matrix*, the news magazine
- *Paperback Inferno*, the latest paperbacks reviewed
- *Focus*, a magazine for SF writers (thrice yearly)

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EDITORIAL

By Kev McVeigh

"Will the future be like Bladerunner? How might we get there, or avoid it?"

"In the United States politics is a profession, whereas in Europe it is a right and a duty." - Umberto Eco

Eco goes on to talk about the European moral obligation to be involved in some way. He does not define his terms, neither "politics" nor "Europe", but writes of his own activities in telling people via his essays just how he sees daily life and events. We are not all as gifted as Eco, but we all have our daily lives, and we feel the effect of major events somehow. What do we do about it?

What does science fiction do about it? Should it, and we, do more? Is there a difference US and British SF in terms of political activity? Is this important?

To answer the easiest question first, yes it is important. SF is an escapist genre, a form of entertainment; it is also an educational genre, an analytical genre which uses extrapolative techniques and provocative stimuli to ask "What if?" and hence sometimes to say that "if" is already here, and that the question should really be "What now?"

SF is also more than just fiction, however, it includes the critical essays and the reviews which accompany it in journals such as *Vector*, and in numerous fanzines. It may be that politics is more important here where issues can be broached directly, with fire and the sword, rather than behind characterisation and plot. Yet again, this leaves a question about the fiction. If it is important at all, shouldn't it be most important in the fiction, without which there could not be the reviews and essays? Yes, and no. The essays are there, in part, to drive the fiction onwards, to make authors grow and develop their ideas, to help them use their themes to the greatest effect, for our benefit as readers and as human beings. Yes, it is important to have politics within science fiction.

I am not saying, of course, that all we read or write must be directly political, but that we should be aware that we do not exist in isolation. We are political every moment of our public lives, every deed and word has an effect upon other human beings and we need to be in control of this so that our actions produce positive results as far as possible. In SF this means looking at the effects of one character upon another, at how one author treats a minority group, at what will really happen if events go as a certain book suggests. Will the future be like *Bladerunner*? How might we get there, or avoid it? These are political questions which should be asked. They do not necessarily have answers, certainly not in precise terms, but whichever

future we want from whichever present we think we live in, we need to make it, it will not happen by accident. We cannot trust to Fortune.

What, then, is SF doing already? Some writers are taking the present, looking very closely at its failings and commenting within their novels. Some choose specific political events, as Kim Stanley Robinson does in *The Gold Coast* with its details of a military project similar in many ways to the Strategic Defense Initiative, or as Lucius Shepard and Lewis Shiner have done regarding US intervention in Central America; others take a more general viewpoint adopting principles such as feminism and anti-racism as Mary Gentle does in *Golden Witchbreed*. There are writers who are exploring the personal, which involves politics on a different scale, but still needs consideration.

That is the fiction, what about the response? Cyberpunk, whatever else it may have meant, has brought about a resurgence of the "Angry Young Men" with outspoken critics attacking bad writing and weak politics as one. Bruce Sterling, John Shirley, Rudy Rucker and Lewis Shiner have done more than generate publicity as the cynics suggest, (though why they shouldn't do what their publishers failed to do is never explained), these writers of the Movement and their alleged antithesis the Humanists, of whom John Kessel has been most vociferous, have tackled in real life the same things that they have tackled in their fictions. The two parts are complimentary, and each is equally vital within an author's oeuvre.

Cyberpunk was a predominantly American phenomenon, however, and only Mike Cobley appears to have been as loudly outspoken as Sterling or Shiner, through his fanzine *Shark Tactics*. Other writers have contributed to specific debates, where they have most to say perhaps. Mary Gentle and Gwyneth Jones appeared in *Vector's* Feminism and SF issue, Chris Priest produced a strong attack on Harlan Ellison, and others have written about their own views.

So it seems as if there is a healthy debate already going on inside science fiction about politics in fiction and reality. The next question is: "Who's listening?" Are we having any major effects. How many people thought twice about buying a *Gor* novel after Mary Gentle's article? And how many bought one to see what all the fuss was over? Did any bookseller withdraw them from sale? Just one article and so many questions. That, to me, is a large part of what science fiction should be about - questions, ways to make think about what I am reading, about what I am doing in my life. The de-

bates on feminism, on cyberpunk, on politics have done this but they have lapsed again. We must not let a Feminist issue of **Vector** become a token, as it was never intended to be. It should be a spark to start something which is continually discussed, and this does not just apply to feminism but racism, colonialism, militarism, and democracy are just a few concepts which should be looked at in our fiction and in our reviews and essays.

This is something, one of several things, which **Vector**, the "Critical Journal of the BSFA" can do to advance science fiction as a genre. It can also work towards the success of SF outside genre boundaries, where even the best writers are looked down upon by demonstrating that many genre writers have more potent views than the mainstream authors who are so lauded. I would like **Vector** to break down the internal barriers of SF, Fantasy and Horror because the worthwhile parts of each all have something to say about our daily lives and events, and each provide a stimulus for thought which is lacking elsewhere. Beyond entertainment these are the things which make SF, Fantasy and Horror worth our concern, worth discussing in **Vector** and which I sometimes think there is not enough of.

Fantasy is currently the "lower class" form of imaginative literature, derided as junk trilogies appear daily, but is it really so worthless? Is it not merely that it is popular and thus writers, editors and publishers seek to repeat a winning formula. Much of it is not badly written, though most is at best competent, but it falls down by being lost in the crowd. Any single fantasy author is generally worth reading, but if you read two or three or four then it seems to be all the same. This is why it is so successful, everybody has their own favourite Fantasy series, be it by David Eddings, Guy Kay or Stephen Donaldson. I suspect that few readers are fans of all three.

There is also Fantasy of a higher standard, which is genuinely fresh and adventurous. These are books which use less clichéd myth sources, or use them correctly to bring new light to them. They take original settings and new characters to tell their stories just as the best of any literature must do.

Below Fantasy however, is the "untouchable" caste - Horror fiction suffers from its association with "slasher" movies and similar novels, a sub-genre which several leading Horror authors have attacked as sick, or as overdone, or as a bad influence on people. These authors, including Clive Barker and Lisa Tuttle, are in their respective styles doing the same thing as Umberto Eco. They are telling us how they see daily life, political events, sometimes the way they look at a movie. It may not always be conscious polemic, it is frequently a subtle subtext, but it is there, and it is important.

David Barrett has built **Vector** up into a stylish magazine which has looked at all aspects of imaginative writing, going beyond the restrictions of "science fiction" into Fantasy, Horror, Surrealism and Magical Realism. He has developed much more than the physical

appearance of the magazine, and his will be a very difficult act to follow, but I believe that using David's base and with the wealth of exciting criticism in the BSFA, then **Vector** will continue to improve and become a widely respected journal. Boyd and I have a lot of ideas about how we can make the magazine more entertaining, more challenging and more imaginative, and perhaps make our subject matter - that amorphous genre loosely called SF, for want of a better term - develop these qualities as well. We also want your ideas, your letters and articles, photographs and artwork. I have already written to many of you whom I know have specific areas of interest and expertise, and spoken to others at conventions. Several of you have already offered to contribute, but if there is anybody else out there who wants instant fame, or just have something to say about SF then please write, because we have people who want to read what you can write.

I know that there is a feeling that the BSFA is run by an elite group of friends which nobody else from the ordinary membership can join. Glaswegian Mike Cobley recently attacked the BSFA for being located entirely in the Home Counties. To be fair to Mike, this was before Boyd and I took over **Vector**, but even then Andy Sawyer (in Liverpool), Joanne Raine (Hartlepool), and Dave Wood (Avon) might object to being ignored in this comment. Nor was there anything to stop Mr Cobley offering his own skills wherever they might lie. It might help to dispel some myths, however, if Boyd and I introduce ourselves.

Key P McVeigh - age 24. Joined BSFA in 1984 after finding a flier in Odyssey 7 Bookshop in Manchester. Began writing occasional reviews for **PI** and letters to all magazines. Produced three issues of **Efnilkufesin** fanzine and occasional letterzines.

Failed University. About to be made redundant from a job as a Laboratory Assistant in a Paper Mill.

Single. Other interests include travel, music and politics.

Favourite authors include: Harlan Ellison, Lucius Shepard, Iain Banks, Ian McDonald, Samuel R Delany, Leigh Kennedy, Tim Powers, Howard Waldrop, David Gerrold, Lisa Tuttle, Garry Kilworth, Josephine Saxton and Terry Pratchett to name but a dozen....

Boyd Parkinson - aged 22. Joined the BSFA in 1985 and hasn't produced any fanzines of any type whatsoever. A former member of the BSFA's silent majority. Currently in charge of the production side of **Vector**, among other things.

Married with one child. Works as an electrician in Vickers Shipbuilding & Engineering Ltd.

Favourite authors are, amongst others, Gene Wolfe, William Gibson, Jack Vance, Ian McDonald, Roger Zelazny, Lucius Shepard, Dr Seuss, KW Jeter, AE van Vogt, Philip K Dick, Eric Brown and Alfred Bester....

"I would like Vector to break down the internal barriers of SF, Fantasy and Horror..."

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* * * * *

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The British Science Fiction Association

The BSFA is a non-profit making organisation whose aims are to encourage the reading, writing and publishing of Science Fiction. Members receive free copies of VECTOR, as well as MATRIX (the association newsletter) and PAPERBACK INFERNO, which reviews all the latest SF paperbacks. Membership costs £10 per year.

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LETTERS

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Arthur C Clarke

Many members of the BSFA may have been surprised to see my name spread across the cover of New Era's leaflet promoting *Writers of the Future Volume III*, so perhaps a word of explanation is in order.

When Volume I was sent to me several years ago, with a request for an endorsement, I was extremely impressed by the quality of the stories and the illustrations, the informative essays and - not least - the production standards. Despite my understandable reservations about promoting anything associated with you-know-who, I felt praise was justified in this case, and sent Bridge my endorsement.

Recently, I was disturbed to see it used again in connection with the latest volume of the series, so I wrote to the publishers (and to Algis Budrys) requesting a correction. I quickly received courteous replies from Algis and Bridge saying that they would restrict the quotation to the first volume.

I've not had time to read the later books in the series, though I've no doubt that they will also contain material of great interest. Alas, my science fiction reading is now about one volume a month - when I am lucky! I hope this makes my position clear.

Arthur C Clarke
Colombo, Sri Lanka

I've always wondered about the mechanics of big name endorsements on books which, frankly, don't always live up to the praise on their covers. Clearly Arthur C Clarke does read the books he is asked to endorse, and is sincere in his praise. - KM

Freedom of choice!

You correctly point out that Mrs Whitehouse's attitude would exclude some items from the cultural repertoire, echoing Ford's "You can have any colour you like so long as it's black", but so would any other attitude, including the liberal one; the reason that any attitude holding sway will necessarily exclude its alternatives. Liberalism is not a "take it or leave it" sect, it is intrusive. If I had children I might even have to emigrate or expose them to a liberal society. You in your editorial are in effect telling me,

"You can have any society you like as long as it's liberal".

A curious assumption, often made when people discuss the need for freedom of choice, is that in order to test the validity of this concept, one need only consider the situation before a choice has been made. That is, one just imagines all these free humans buzzing around like electrons in a plasma, perpetually enjoying the state of being in the position to make a choice about something, but not actually doing it. For once they do do it, they've used a freedom-of-choice to buy a commitment-to-choice.

As with a free individual, so with a free society: if it wants to do anything with its freedom it is going to make choices. For instance, it could put up a building here, a moral tradition there. It could decide to go for the formula which I define as "Moral isotropy": the doctrine, or assumption, that the moral landscape is smooth; that there are no particular cliffs or chasms in it, no objective "thou-shalt-not's"; the only moral truths are general. This is called liberalism. Or alternatively, society could try to accommodate the pressures exerted by the reality that the moral landscape is no more smooth than our physical bodies; both dimensions contain particular forms - this is called decency.

The trouble with decency is in trying to form a consensus. The trouble with liberalism is its great commandment, Thou shalt travel hopefully but thou shalt make damn well sure thou never gettest anywhere.

Neither of these is an answer. There are no principled answers.

Robert Gibson

74 Turners Hill, Hemel Hempstead, Herts.
HP2 4LH

I'm not sure what you are saying is wrong with liberalism, which basically says that you can say or do anything which does not cause harm to any other person. I know of know such commandment such as you allege, but as you say there are no general answers, only individual ones. - KM

Social function of SF

What is SF for? Well, it's primarily to make money for authors and publishers. It's a marketing tool. It helps label books to make

it easier for readers to avoid buying something they're not used to. Oh, the terror of surprise!

Please forgive my cynicism. I'm just tired of the profusion of sequels of sequels, epic series and mythos creation. Why do SF authors never think small? Is it less profitable?

As for the social function of SF, I'm sure that isn't too difficult to give a sketch of. SF is the form in a technical age of the ancient tradition of fantastic storytelling that goes back as far as "Gilgamesh" at least. Its functions? I'm no sociologist, but how about this list: entertainment, socialisation of children, reinforcement of social forms, reassurance of the triumph of good (us) over evil (them), and allowing us to fantasise facing and defeating the fears in our own imaginations. The academics would probably modify that list considerably, but it's the best I can do!

Alex Downey

33 Park Road, Hampton Hill, Middlesex,
TW12 1HG

You cynic, Alex, but see my editorial for my views on the social functions of SF. As for SF never thinking small, there are two responses. Firstly, it seems that US authors tend to save the world in their work, whereas British authors merely (?) save a character's small corner of the world. Obviously this is only a vague generalisation, but it works on a quick scan across my nearest bookshelf. What does anybody else think? Are there such differences between Britain and America?

The other response is: What is wrong with thinking big sometimes? If a writer can do it, then why not? - KM

If it had happened...

In answer to Denis Tucker's appeal in V150: Churchill's "If Lee had not won the Battle of Gettysburg" can be found in *If it had happened otherwise* (ed JC Squire), Longmans 1932, enlarged edn. (introd. J Wheeler-Bennett), S&J 1972.

Theo Ross

2 Dalriach Park Terrace, Oban, Argyll,
Scotland.

Chung Kuo:

An Alternative Perspective



IT'S SOME WHILE since I wrote a novella called "A Chinese Perspective". It was published in an anthology edited by Christopher Priest and I have never reprinted it because it is one of those stories where I know more remains to be said on the subject. The main concern of the story is the quiet take-over of the world by the Chinese.

My story has now been taken over and finished - with trumps - by David Wingrove, with his quite extraordinary series-novel, *Chung Kuo*, this seven-volume novel which finally delivers SF into the hands of an English Proust. *Chung Kuo* depicts a Chinese-dominated world of the future; it is "about the most interesting time of all - the event-filled years to come". Those words are Wingrove's, and they carry me, in their simplicity, back to the time when I was a boy, when what I wished most to read about were, precisely, "the event-filled years to come". That was before SF really had its label; it simply concerned "the event-filled years to come"; and the naivety of that phrase contains the hope intrinsic to all naivety.

Presumably Wingrove uses the phrase because he wants to avoid the label SF. One may be proud to be a science fiction writer, yet at the same time resent type-casting. That's as it should be. *Mythago Wood* has been labelled SF and Fantasy, and one understands why; yet we also understand that it is neither of these things, or both. It's beyond them. The label is a detraction, a distraction. So with *Chung Kuo*.

We can be sure that the novels of *Chung*

Kuo are remarkable enough. Before we hold them in our hands, we have only the initial sale of the concept to marvel at. It is remarkable enough to be unique for an author with no published novels behind him to sell to British and American publishers a series of seven novels with a foreign title. When did a British writer do that before?

The publishers themselves - and of course I am here thinking mainly of New English Library - have shown unusual faith in *Chung Kuo*. They produced, earlier this year, a brochure or booklet with full colour cover, *The World of Chung Kuo*, as an introduction to Wingrove's new world. As I understand, they also intend to issue a periodical while the novels are being published. This too is without precedent in the science fiction field.

Shortly before writing these words, I watched on an off-air video that scene in Beijing early in June, when the students were demonstrating and the 27th Army was just being unleashed on unarmed civilians. One man, a member of that great Chinese clan of Wang, stood and defied the tanks, halting their progress. You probably saw it. If you saw it, you must remember it, as do millions of people all around the globe. You remember it because it stands as a supreme moment of courage. It is enshrined in one of the great bits of news footage. It tells us about ourselves. Well, it's also a science fiction moment - more than that, of course, but also that - man against machine, machine blindly, gropingly, trying to get round the more manoeuvrable human being.

As I was trying to come to terms with that scene in Beijing, I suddenly thought of *Chung Kuo*, and it was exactly this sort of historic moment Wingrove was trying to enshrine, parse, and replicate. For China is not remote; the Chinese are not different from us; we are they.

Yet China is remote. The Chinese are different from us. We are not they.

In *The World of Chung Kuo*, David Wingrove describes what it was like to live in North Battersea in 1962, a rough area, with half of it bombed flat and still left as a brick desert, not rebuilt since the war. He remembers the dead houses, boarded up, rotting. He played there as a boy, among the broken teeth of history. The Chinese in our time have been forced into something of the same position. But people rise again, and rise out of the ruins with a new spirit. I suppose it will be that spirit we shall see in *Chung Kuo*.

I believe as Wingrove does that Mao, the Great Helmsman, was a force for good in China. A legendary man. Every century produces a few such, with enormous power

for good and evil. That he assumed the mantle of of orientalist Communism was almost beside the point. Mao managed to unify a great country destroyed, turned into a wasteland by years of invasion and civil war. It was utterly demoralised by 1945. The poor in their millions went barefoot. No aid from outside could put China together again. What it required was human will. Mao Tse-tung awakened that will, and the pride that was needed. Later, of course, Mao became a tyrant; but that was another chapter.

At present, China is in a mess, moral, economic, and cultural. But that will change. Things are going to change: that's one thing we can predict with certainty. What will not change is that there will always be the rare man who will come forward from the crowd and defy a column of tanks.

What makes an English author wish to write about a distant country like China? Several answers spring to mind. But a love of distance, a fascination with historical process, is part of the natural equipment of the science fiction writer. Many things can initiate such interests - a night in childhood spent under the stars, or a bomb in the back garden. Or, of course, the counterpoise of a mind which balances the great things of the world with the little and the personal; a religious sense - which need have nothing to do with god - which tells you everything is bloody marvellous.

Wingrove's fascination with China is of long duration. He mentions, modestly, that he was attracted as a small boy to the strangeness of the Chinese mandarin in a Rupert the Bear story. I like that. That's perfectly understood. Big things begin small, on the home hearth. I remember stumbling across Arthur Waley's translations of Chinese poems when I was a boy, and being seized immediately by their qualities - quite unlike anything else encountered at that date. From then on, I was hooked on China. My love of it has spread a benevolent influence on my life. I'm certainly ready for *Chung Kuo*. All seven volumes.

And whatever comes after that....

Brian Aldiss ■

Chung Kuo literally translates as "the middle kingdom" which is what the Chinese call China.

The first volume of *Chung Kuo* is called *The Middle Kingdom*, and is published by New English Library. David Wingrove is a former editor of *Vector*, and the author of various non-fiction works.

-BP

TALKING TO RAMSEY CAMPBELL

was in some ways like scenes from some of his stories. Half-way into requesting an interview from a slightly sinister answering machine, a voice answered... images from his story "Call First" flashed through my head before I realised that Ramsey had also picked up the phone. Later, when discussing the ideas for his stories, Ramsey referred to his tale "The Telephones" - and something equally unnerving happened. Even later, the tape of the interview was found to be partially overwhelmed by a particularly Lovecraftian gremlin.

Ramsey Campbell began as a writer with stories in the Lovecraftian tradition, encouraged by August Derleth. His first book was a collection of short stories, *The Inhabitant of the Lake* (1964). He has won British Fantasy Awards for his novels *The Parasite* (1980) and *Incarnate* (1985), and the short story "In The Bag" (1978), while two other short stories, "The Chimney" (1978) and "Mac-kintosh Willy" (1980), both won World Fantasy Awards. Among his most recent works are the novels *The Hungry Moon* (Arrow) and *The Influence* (Century), and the collections *Night Visions 3* (Century; with Clive Barker and Lisa Tuttle) and *Dark Feasts* (Robinson), a representative collection of his shorter work from his earlier days up to "Boiled Alive", which appeared in *Interzone* 18.

Over a writing career of 25 years (he is still in his early 40s) Ramsey Campbell has developed a unique style of revelation and allusion which adapts the bases of earlier horror writers such as Machen, Blackwood (and especially MR James) to settings in modern Britain: powerful visions of urban decay. However, much of his technique of suspense and slow revelation, as well as the grim slapstick evident in many of his stories, comes from the cinema. He has reviewed film and video for *Radio Merseyside* for almost as long as he has been writing fiction, and many of his books pay homage of his love for the cinema. *The Parasite* features a husband-and-wife team of film lecturers and writers. *Incarnate* contains a mentally subnormal film projectionist. An incident in *Rocky III* is acknowledged as a spark for *Obsession*, while the forthcoming *Ancient Images* concerns a lost 30s horror film.

In the past few years, his impatience with the self-imposed boundaries of most horror fiction has caused him to try experiments most genre writers would not dream of, and most commentators would place him in the pantheon where sit those who were his mentors. He is, of course, the Grand Master of British Horror and, in this interviewer's opinion, the greatest living writer of horror fiction....

Ramsey Campbell

Interviewed by
Andy Sawyer



People interviewing you tend to use expressions like "grand master of British horror fiction" and "greatest living writer of horror fiction" in their preambles. How do you deal with this?

By continuing to write, I think. Basically by trying to do better than I did last time, because I think that if you stop trying to compete with yourself rather than with other writers then you're really risking repeating your successes. I think the other answer to the question is ignoring them - it's very pleasant to be told these things - but not entertaining a word of them while I'm writing because that way smugness lies. What I do as a general rule ever since my first collection (*The Inhabitant of the Lake*) is to try and identify those things that are typical of how I work and then see what happens if I try to do without them.... Obsession, for instance, seems to me to do that in a variety of ways.

Many fans seem to look down on horror in the same way as so-called "mainstream" critics look down on SF....

Yes, I had an extraordinary experience with this a few years ago. A young lady who used to be the BSFA librarian came up to me at a party and said "Why do you write that kind of thing?" in tones and with a look on her face that would have gone with picking something up between a finger and thumb and then looking for the next place to drop it, and then go and wash your hands in disinfectant; and I've never understood why somebody who presumably experienced that sort of attitude, as a science fiction librarian, from people in, for want of a better word, the "mainstream" would want to do it to

someone else. Unless of course it's a matter of finding a scapegoat and saying: "Look, those folk over there are even worse than we are! We at least read science fiction; look at these horrid people that read this other stuff."

I do think there's a similar judging within the horror field and I think it's one into which one can all too easily be trapped, to say: "I am writing the legitimate stuff and other people are writing revolting illiterate tripe which sells a lot of copies." Which actually to some extent is probably true. But I think it's too easy to find another kind of scapegoat there. After all, we're all working in the same field and, more often than one might expect, working with similar material. I think it's what one does with it that counts, essentially. There's a particular kind of horror fiction which seems to me to feed on taboos rather than challenge them, a kind of horror fiction which reads as though if all the taboos were driven away, the writers would no longer have anything to write about at all.

Where do the stories come from?

All sorts of places - the latest novel, *The Influence*, comes partly from my daughter Tamsin's resemblance to her grandmother in turns of phrase and expressions on her face. "The Companion" comes from the old fairground in New Brighton. "The Ferries" from the extraordinary view across the Dee estuary from Parkgate....

...Flat grass and marshes where the sea used to be....

...a story I wanted to write for a year until - the simplest ideas are the best - I had the image of a ship sailing across the grasses.

The more you write, the more ideas you have. You never get short of ideas. It's the minutest detail that sparks you off - such as walking past a telephone box and hearing a phone ring.... (Phone rings) WRITE THAT DOWN!

(At that point the phone rang. After I scraped myself off the ceiling we continued the interview.)

One other example is a story I was asked to contribute to an anthology, *Architecture of Fear*. Everyone was sent a form letter by the editor Kathleen Cramer explaining that the idea was to produce stories in which the settings - buildings, etc. - embodied states of character "as Ramsey Campbell does in *Incarnate*". Well, I seized up. I couldn't write to my own formula, and it wasn't until I started thinking about when we'd moved here and I was going backwards and forwards 'round the corner to our old house to check that no-one had broken in and all that, that I developed the idea of someone selling his house to a man who rebuilds a lot of the rooms and every time he goes 'round to see the house it's changed and he finds different areas of his memories are gone along with the old rooms. Then there's "Seeing The World" which is just and extension of viewing someone's holiday slides - no-one in particular's, I hasten to add.

So what sort of aims do you have in your material? Does horror aim to scare or does it have other goals as well?

I began writing, in my first collection, to pay back the pleasure writers such as Lovecraft and Machen gave me, the sense of awe you get in these writers at their best. But I continue because it gives me the chance to talk about various themes - *Incarnate*, for example, is very much about the abuse of authority - although very often these themes don't become apparent until after I've finished the book.

More and more I'm not interested in just scaring. The scene in *Incarnate* where the stamps come alive I'm not sure is particularly frightening, but it seemed to fit in that book. I do want to extend the field of horror fiction, but perhaps I'd better get this clear that I don't want to "transcend" the genre, as some people would have it - I find the idea absurd, and also a denigration of the achievements of the field. And while I do welcome the sense that my readers like to think a bit while they're reading, I'm not sure I'd go along with the distinction between "graphic" horror and "subtle" horror. I don't want to write graphic stuff which is a substitute for the imagination but I may write it if I can use it as a way of extending the imagination. I suppose I want to show you what I see and make you look again at what you might have taken for granted.

There are writers within SF, such as Ian Watson with *The Power and parts of The Fire Worm*, who are turning to genre horror. In fact Watson wrote in an article ("The Author as Torturer", *Foundation* 40) "Some interesting things are happening in horror, which at its best (Clive Barker, Ramsey Campbell, Jonathon Carroll) is becoming experimental literature." Do you think there is this movement between the two genres?

Well, I think there always has been. I mean, Lovecraft was writing SF and horror often simultaneously. Fritz Leiber has been working with one foot in each camp, or his head in its own special place, for it must be 40 or 50 years now. But yes, I do think there has perhaps been an increase in the cross-feeding which seems to me - I know there are science fiction writers who would disagree with me, but it seems to me that this can only be a good thing. To take another writer, when it produces work of such power as some of Mike Harrison's: "Running Down"; is that science fiction or a horror story? I would have thought it's probably both. Certainly I would make claims for it for the horror field. I would have thought it's a strength, not a weakness, if we can draw upon as many forms as possible.

You've used the word "awe" in connection with horror. It's a term you've used a lot.

I think for me the best horror fiction doesn't simply shock but it also has this sense of something larger undescribed. This is certainly what I always got from Lovecraft. I still do; even the titles of Lovecraft conjure up enormous images. For me, the best horror fiction has a visionary quality. Blackwood has it, Lefanu in his darker vision certainly has it; people like Ted Klein, Mike Harrison, Clive Barker... again it's to say that horror has a largeness of effect at its best.

How does this relate to the good old science fiction "sense of wonder"?

They are, I'd have thought, very similar. There is a kind of horror fiction as well as science fiction which has a cosmic sense. They're at their closest precisely then. Although there is another sense in which they are entirely different. You could scarcely find two more different writers than Stapledon and Lovecraft and yet there's a sense in which *Last and First Men* and much of Lovecraft start from precisely the same perception, but in the case of Lovecraft it's the terror of the universe rather than, as with Stapledon, the wonder of it. But there's still the same central impulse, the same underlying vision, if you like, or seed of a vision.

There's a sense of pessimism in Stapledon, I find.



"... I don't want to 'transcend' the genre
... I find the idea
absurd ... a
denigration of the
achievements of the
field..."

Well, they're more closely connected than I thought.

But doesn't horror dwell on the irrational side of knowledge - I'm thinking of *Guildd Kent in Incarnate*: "Preserve us from rationalism, that's all I can say. It's at the root of all our troubles."

Don't forget she's mad at the point when she says that!

Then there's also for want of a better word the "religious" awe present in your work. There's the idea of redemption in *Obsession*: a line right at the climax which turns the idea of "pact with the devil" on its head: "Yet what kind of evil was it that had shown him that giving into temptation led to greater and greater suffering?"

I think it's a part of the developing what I'm talking about. I suppose in a sense I couldn't go on for the rest of my life being quite as bleak and pessimistic as I was in some of the early stories in the 1970s. There was a period in the mid to late '70s when I seemed to get blacker and blacker and you knew



"It struck me as nightmarish enough in itself - all those houses going on and on and on - all you need to do is describe."

perfectly well that the worst possible thing that could happen to the characters 'was going to happen to them. Leaving aside the possibility that I was boring myself into a vault from which there was no escape, I think it was inevitable that I tried to find something to be at least ambiguous if not positive about. I do think that I see that this period was a stage in some way towards the next book and that there was some kind of developing hopefulness about things from *Incarnate* onwards, probably. But of course I'm not the person who sees this - not until the books are finished. It's always a process I'm never quite conscious of; not until I look back, anyway.

This "bleakness" is perhaps the Campbellian characteristic in the early stories, especially. One thing you do get from Lovecraft is a sense of place - his haunted New England perhaps doesn't exist, but you get the feeling it ought to. Your urban landscapes - "Briechester", Liverpool, are authentically seedy and run-down.

"Briechester" is, of course, Liverpool. I was describing the settings more or less

accurately and in the end decided to use the real name. The scenes for *The Doll Who Ate His Mother* and *The Face That Must Die* exist. I took copious notes for background detail. Steve Rasnic Tem wrote about horror fiction being "character displaced on landscape", looking to landscape for insight on character, and for *Face* I went to Cantrill Farm (a vast Liverpool "overspill" estate) to look around and present it through Horridge's eyes. It struck me as nightmarish enough in itself - all those houses going on and on and on - all you need to do is describe.

*You use that image of infinite rows of houses a lot - in *Incarnate* and to some extent in *The Influence*.*

The everyday becoming nightmarish, perhaps? But what is horror? Is it a separate element? One editor objected to a story of mine on the grounds that *everything* was sinister. But that was what it was supposed to be.

Though there's a fine line between being sinister and menacing and being macabrely funny. I'm thinking of the kind of uneasy laughter some of your stories provoke - "Call First", "Seeing The World"....

I read "Down There" aloud once to laughter all the way through. But this is part of the horror tradition, of course. There's a lot of surreal humour in MR James - mouths under pillows and that sort of thing. Humour and horror both deal with taboo material; they stylise material which wouldn't otherwise be dealt with. And humour of course can be grotesque. They can both force you to look again at things you've taken for granted.

*Your stories do seem to be becoming lighter, more oblique. In *The Hungry Moon* when Nick and Diana and Eustace are driving towards the missile base, while this nightmarish creature from the moon is going to bring about all sorts of apocalypse, there's that delightful sequence where they talk about Laurel and Hardy and bad jokes.*

Well, I see *The Hungry Moon* as essentially a sort of comic novel in many ways - there's definitely a sort of black comedy in it. It's a difficult tightrope walk to achieve, I think. There are odd moments in John Carpenter's movies recently: in *The Thing* when one of the characters sees the spidery severed head running away and says "You've got to be fucking kidding," and more recently in *Prince of Darkness* where a character tells a terrible joke to keep his spirits up. I'm not sure if it quite works but it was the sort of thing I was aiming at.

Robinson Publishing recently issued *Dark Feasts* which shows your different approaches to horror by selecting from previous collections. Was this a self-selection?

Yes, apart from "The Whining" because the publishers were fond of it and we put in "The Room in the Castle" as a sort of representative indication of where I was coming from in my first book, but otherwise yes, it was pretty well my selection. I've written several other stories which, for various copyright reasons, weren't available for that book then so it might be that we do the American edition of *Dark Feasts* in some expanded form, or maybe I'll wait the next 25 years and do *Dark Feasts* part 2, who knows?

And what's coming up in the future?

Scream Press in the States are issuing a limited edition of *The Influence* with art by JK Potter, using the actual locations in and around Merseyside and North Wales including shots of Tamsin as Rowan, the young girl in the story. The UK paperback edition of *The Influence* should come out around February or March, along with the hardback of the new novel *Ancient Images* which is about a lost '30s horror film. It continues the way I've tried to work against received notions of evil, psychopaths, etc.; it partly concerns a family whose source of wealth comes from the enactment of a ritual but in a sense it's a book without a villain - he just doesn't look at the moral sources of his wealth. *Scared Stiff*, published last year in the USA, works against the preconceived notion that horror is a "front" for sex by bringing the sexual element to the forefront of the stories; another anthology is *Stories That Scared Me*, in which you should find some stories that you haven't seen before.

The next major project I have in mind is a big supernatural novel which will attempt to convey the sort of sustained supernatural sense at novel length that "The Voice of the Beach" did at novelette length. The tentative title is *Midnight Sun* but whether I keep that I honestly don't know at this point. I'm doing a collection of stories for Lord John Press in California, who do Beckett and Updike and Bradbury, which is a pleasing development. Other than that, more short stories undoubtedly; I've just written a new MR Jamesian story which will probably appear in a curious double language German edition by Editions Phantasia over there. More short stories, more introductions, more reviews in "Shock Xpress" when I'm feeling sufficiently vicious about something.

Ramsey Campbell, thank you. ■

Ancient Images, the latest novel by Ramsey Campbell (published by Legend and priced £12.95) was reviewed in Vector 150.

Many thanks to my brother for providing the face used in the artwork with this interview. Hope you're feeling better now...

-BP

Hubris, and the SF Writer

By Cecil Nurse

"If scientific plausability is neither a necessary nor sufficient condition for good SF ... what is there [for] a scientifically minded audience..."

IN HIS EDITORIAL in *Vector* 146, David Barrett asked some searching questions about the interface of SF and reality, and cited George Turner (author of *The Sea and Summer*, Arthur C Clarke award winner) as a writer who might be described as "doing it right" (my phrase). Turner himself has an article in that issue. Both these articles, and John Gribbin's "reply" to Turner, I found strangely disturbing, and I would like, here, to answer Barrett and simultaneously voice my disquiet.

George Turner believes that "a responsible literature must play a part in forming society, not merely reporting on it", and has written what, in his opinion, is a "responsible" novel: he has meditated upon the future and presented his understanding of it in a form "assimilable" by the general reader. The obvious question is: who the hell does he think he is? The obvious answer is: he is someone who thinks the mass readership has not heard of the greenhouse effect, overpopulation, ecological degradation etc, etc, and feels that he must warn them before it all hits them on the nose. They're already here, Mr Turner; where were you?

SF "once had a genuine concern for the future, [and now] has scarcely a word to say about encroaching realities", he says. It is a genre dedicated to the premise: "if you don't look, it will go away", though originally it was "specifically designed... to foster thought". Turner, apparently, once read science fiction, though perhaps he doesn't any more. Now it "merely fantasises about different times and places". Where does such a poor opinion of the genre come from? Where does such contempt grow? Nevertheless, he has written a science fiction novel. Or has he? His intention was to produce a novel "designed to appeal to the wider readership that so rightly distrusts science fiction"; in fact, it is not meant to be read by anyone that already reads SF. Dear me, serves him right to win an award for Best SF novel of the year.

Does my last comment ring a bell? Do you, like Turner, have this convoluted contempt that seems to characterise so many

SF readers? Is it our self-contempt that gives a Best SF Award to a man who disdains the genre? No, it is because he dreams of, and has done his best to produce, a worthy SF novel. "Every novel worth its salt has something to say," he says, echoing those whose very criterion of "worthiness" bars SF from the sacred halls of literature. He will write a story based "firmly on people, not on wild imagining", will avoid "demonstrating ideas [at the expense of] the truth of behaviour". His novel will answer those who say SF is not about "the real world" by being responsible, and those who say it is not "worthy" by being about people. His concerns, clearly, are first and foremost the rehabilitation of science fiction, which, it is true, is a "real world" concern. But in the "real world", the young read SF partly because it is *not* responsible, because it does not kowtow to literary orthodoxy, and because it does not resound with the morality of one's elders and betters. Can one have it both ways?

John Gribbin's "reply" to Turner reflects many of these same attitudes, except from the other side. "A good story with believable people facing real problems wins every time". How many times have you heard this from people profoundly out of sympathy with science fiction? Real people facing believable problems, that's what you want, non of this sci-fi malarkey! Yet this man also reads and writes SF. How does he manage it?

Gribbin does not demand scientific plausability of his science fiction. In fact, one senses that he *prefers* that it be implausible. Greg Bear's *Blood Music* is "uncomfortably close to the possibilities inherent in existing technology", his hackles rise when hokum is presented as plausible extrapolation, and Turner's science is "not really fiction at all". What is important is that it be "a rattling good read", with characters one cares about facing situations that "do not exist in the real world". This is his *presumption* about SF, this scientist who is busy proselytising SF to the New Scientist audience. He is disappointed in Turner's work, not because it does not deal

with real problems, but because it is a dull read. If scientific plausibility is neither a necessary nor sufficient condition for good SF, I ask myself what is there to recommend SF as a genre to a scientifically minded audience?

I note that Gribbin sees the melting of the ice caps and the flooding of Melbourne that occur in Turner's book as "not really fiction", as, in some sense, scientific facts about the future. How does he know that? What makes him think that Greg Bear's scenario is in any way plausible, that a genetic engineer would not see it as just another load of rabble-rousing crap? The greenhouse effect, surely, is just a theory, albeit a currently popular one, about how the immensely complicated climate and ecosphere of the world will respond to increased levels of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere. I watch television too, and that's why I think the greenhouse effect is more plausible than, say, UFOs.

Scientific plausibility, in science fiction, is a strangely destructive virtue, despite and because it has been the orthodoxy for many years. Imagine a young reader, less sure of where plausibility ends and hokum begins than Gribbin seems to be, confronted, twenty years ago, with a Greenhouse Effect or Nuclear Winter SF story. He has two choices: he can believe it, and run the risk of being seen as an SF loony; or he can disbelieve it, and enjoy the fantasy. From bitter experience with other amazing ideas, he will choose the latter; twenty years later, he will say "I've known about it for twenty years", and will leave unsaid "but I never believed it, because it was science fiction". Gribbin, despite his contentment with implausible but gripping reads, still speaks of "serious scientific speculation", as if SF can provide what he knows he will only believe when he hears it from a practising scientist.

Barrett asks the question: "why don't non-SF writers and researchers think to consult 'the experts', people who make their daily living by speculating on the future, extrapolating from today's trends to realistic tomorrows?" Perhaps he would not consider Turner or Gribbin "expert" enough, but they are SF writers. Gribbin regards such extrapolation with deep distrust, scientist that he is. Turner, on the other hand, is a man with the ambition not merely to bring the real world (of the future) to the attention of the real world (of the present), but to show the entire genre how it should be done. Would you buy a new or slightly used world from these men?

Barrett says: "SF writers and readers should have a special ability to see the future, several possible futures, and how we might get there." What makes him think so? Granted that he may be stating strongly what many may believe more diffusely, let me answer strongly: you are an SF loony! You have believed the wild imaginings of SF writers, who imagined that they could sense the seeds of the future, who imagined that

they, in their wild imaginings, comprehended something about the real world that others could not. All of them suspect, if not know, that it is all just wild imagining, and yet, and yet it is about something. They know it, their readers know it, but what is it?

Turner, Gribbin and Barrett, from whom I ask forgiveness for treating so roughly, seem to me representative residents of the "SF ghetto", which is surrounded by the chasm between what they feel SF could or should be, and what it is. It is *escapist*. What is the opposite of escapism? For Turner it is not skipping "the hard part", which is the near-future, the future he may actually have to live in; he has done this by providing "polemic and propaganda" (Gribbin's words) for this future to rally around. It is also, for him, to write about people, to pick up and carry the torch of literature. For Gribbin it is "serious scientific speculation", and if he does not write SF that is scientifically plausible or serious, it is because for him SF is irredeemably escapist. For Barrett, it is serious study of the future, and helping us to be ready for it. We have, in a nutshell, four of the directions from which SF is denigrated as escapist - from politics, from literature, from science, from futurologists and planners - and these SF writers/readers are saying how SF should be more like its denigrators want it to be. Jews also admire Nazis.

I am not condemning this. What I am saying is that we who see SF as escapist have accepted the terms of our enemies. Politics, literature, science, futurology and planning, all have their own righteous "literatures"; they don't need SF. SF is something different, and has always been different, despite the scientific rhetoric.

Science fiction is about the imagination, and imagination, guys, is *real*. Everybody has it, everybody uses it, everybody lives with it every single day of their lives. Our imaginations shape the world, by its presence or its absence. We cannot create/believe/become/understand what we cannot imagine. It seems to me the cyberpunks understand this: that is why they are not ashamed of SF; that is why they consider themselves to be fundamentally different from the previous generation of SF writers and readers, who *are*.

In a supremely, smugly, self-consciously, rationalistic world, imagination inevitably gets a bad press. No-one is quite sure where it fits in, what it's good for. Worse, people forget what it looks like. Turner thinks he is following in the footsteps of *Brave New World* and 1984 by creating a "recognisable future", when it is only by a stretch of the imagination that one can "recognise" the worlds in these books. Worst, and most relevant to the readers of SF, it becomes a guilty secret that withers at the touch of reality instead of blossoming anew, and the "real world" becomes something you can't quite seem to get to from SF. The ancients knew better. *They* believed in gods!■

"Science fiction is about the imagination, and imagination is real..."

Busy About the Tree of Life

"Entropy is a recurrent theme, things spiralling down like eddies of dust glinting in sunlight..."

PAMELA ZOLINE'S *Busy About the Tree of Life* contains four previously published stories, of which "The Heat Death of the Universe" is one of the classic stories of the New Worlds 1960s New Wave, and "Instructions for Exiting This Building in Case of Fire" appeared in both *Despatches from the Frontiers of the Female Mind* and *Interzone*. The title story is new. Entropy is a recurrent theme, things spiralling down like eddies of dust glinting in sunlight, settling as an accumulation of disorder. Not that order is in any too great shape to start with.

If you like your causality plain and simple, you won't find Zoline your cup of tea. Hers is a quantum mechanic's view of the universe; successive observations are plotted along the time axis. Correlations emerge from the accident of probabilities. Causality is problematic; certainly no determinism can be claimed. No simple, single knock-on effect - no red billiard ball sends black to miss opposite pocket. It's not even as simple as single ball breaks up neat triangle to a rainbow of balls rolling from point of impact all over the billiard table, velocity and angle of reflection foretold by velocity and angle of incidence, in equal and opposite reaction as required by Newton's Third Law. Rather, think of the ripples that spread from hailstones dropping in the ocean, not just circles of ripples interfering with each other but all lost among the waves and tides, and how do you keep track of that?

Humans have this advantage over sub-nuclear particles: it is not physically impossible to track an individual from location to location, it is only impossible to directly observe their inner (mental and emotional) states.

End of the World 1: Disintegration

In "Heat Death", housework is the battlefield against entropy, that ultimate determinism legislated by Newton's Second. The odds are stacked against us, like a careless tower of unwashed dishes threatening, any moment, to crash in pieces all over the floor. The human collocations of organic molecules that is Sarah Boyle is tracked along the time

axis of one day. Fifty-four sequentially numbered paragraphs give equal weight to inner and outer states and events, to definitions of relevant concepts, recording with equal precision the conventional and the crazy. Sugar Prosties with Free Gift and Special Offers for the children's breakfast: she envisages paranoid headlines "Nation's Small Fry Stricken, Fate's Finger Sugar-Coated, Lethal Sweetness Kills Tots". She does the washing, tidies the house. Sarah labels objects around the house, but is never sure how many children she has. Her eyes are blue: "a fine, modern, acid, synthetic blue... the promising, fat, unnatural blue of the heavy tranquiliser capsule; the cool, mean blue of that fake kitchen sponge..." At lunch only one glass of milk is spilled. A children's party in the afternoon, one little boy is sick. She cleans up after the party. The turtle in its bowl in the kitchen has died. No wonder Sarah Boyle surrenders to entropy; more, she defects to it, becomes its agent, showers the floor with eggs, shards of bunny dishes, strawberry jam, food and glasses and dishes. It is what is known as a breakdown.

As a story, the causality you deduce is likely to strike you as depressing. The deduction to be drawn from violet circles under her eyes and beginning to cry is that Sarah's inner state, for all the bright plethora of objects that stocked the Californian dream home of this bright, witty, articulate, frequently smiling young wife and mother, was not happy. Nor does it seem that her liberation from the army of order brings any joy in release. That's entropy for you.

"Holland of the Mind" too explores the process of breakdown, the disintegration of family, marriage and individual in the Netherlands "lowlands", a richly sensuous decay of both the abundant flowers and an American couple's meaning of life.

End of the World 2: Catastrophe

Two "end of the world" stories, "Instructions for Exiting..." and the title story "Busy about the Tree of Life" hypothesise strategies for beating the final nuclear probability. One little boy Gabriel, the product and offspring of compounded improbabilities, the ultimate

deterrent against the holocaust. Each of his parents, and his parents' parents back to the fifth generation, first survived, scatheless and smiling, a major catastrophe (San Francisco earthquake, Australian bushfire, Hindenberg, Titanic...), then themselves died in a disaster. Could there be such a child, the convergence of five generations of disaster catching and disaster surviving? If, just if, he existed then (presumption of causality) the nation which held him could hope to survive as he would. To remove that promise of pre-emptive first strike, he's held with "a minimum of three naked-eye real-time observers at all times" and a pet dog, closely monitored, cared for in an international security centre. As logic, it's a montage of the splendid variety and eccentricity of people. Of course, it's no solution, based on a (literally) vanishing improbability and the unreliable myths about chance that have lured gamblers to self-destruction throughout the ages.

Contrast "Exiting": "It was when the minute hand on the Doomsday clock fluttered and hiccupped in those rare seconds before midnight that we finally acted... to change history." Again a child is the key: a particular child. Radically Visualised in all her colours, smells, wriggles and gestures, multiplied by other children all over the world, stolen away: "what is this child, my child, my luminous girl doing in Moscow, on a park bench, wrapped in foreign winter gear and licking a chocolate ice-cream." Why, saving the world. The ancient Celts had a similar custom, chiefs' children were brought up in fosterage with neighbouring tribes, as hostages. The idea that Reagan's children and grandchildren should have been sent to live in Moscow, Gorbachev's in Washington, has been seriously suggested. Zoline's vision is more democratic:

And all over the globe, along with the massive grieving and anger, there is a kind of stirring of consciousness, a kind of glimpsed recognition of this pattern, the strategy and its point. Can we humans, we sapient ones, come to take care of our offspring with the same concern and good sense shown by other beasts? If a nuclear missile aimed at my "enemy" is also, by definition, aimed at my children, will it stay my hand?

There are plenty of SF stories which start with the holocaust as a handy way of clearing away the mess of today so their author can indulge in a tough adventurous new world. Off-hand, I remember no other stories envisaging ways for the world to find its way back from the brink. Don't be distracted by recent events. Ronnie and Gorbie may have agreed to dismantle 2,000-odd of the 50,000 missiles concealed about our planet, and be talking about cutting down further on their nuclear habit. Believe it when you see it, meanwhile watch all their hands. This hand in Nicaragua, that

hand in Afghanistan, Philippines, Angola, Mozambique, Ethiopia, Middle East. Off the top of my head I count 16 little wars today, played with the deadly serious toys of war we sell. The problem's not nuclear, there's no technological fix. The problems are starvation, callousness, helplessness, vengeful hate. The problems are embodied as people, who are the atoms of politics. Condemn the shelves of cold hard gleaming facts about weaponry, its glamour and its horror, as hopelessly naive. Praise Zoline for being hopelessly naive.

Existentialism vs Solipsism

Zoline, like Angela Carter and Josephine Saxton, glories in the irreducible obstinacy of things, objects, individuals, in all their colours, smells, contrariety and sensual richness. There's nothing of the solipsist in Sarah Boyle; the world is all too real, no amount of scepticism will make the scrunch underfoot go away. Perhaps the reason solipsism has no lure for women is that one is quite sure no-one would dream up a world filled with washing up. Zoline might be construed as existentialist, now and then, of a sort. But the existence asserted is as much the sensual world as the ~~whole~~ ^{whole}, the awareness consequently more outer directed than inner. Women are not encouraged to be egocentric, rather our culture conditions us towards sustaining that idealised conflict-free ecology, the nuclear family; men and children first, then feed the pets.

Is plot egocentric? The notion that following the actions of one character is the way to tell a story. Undeniable. Does the "cogito ergo sum" underlying formal logic incline to egocentricity? Plausibly so. "Sheep" jumps among a mosaic of dream and nightmare worlds, pursuing sleep, counting those placid wool-bearing ruminants through pastoral myths, wolves, terrorism, wars. No rest for the innocent.

Consider a new mythic dualism. The Ancient Greeks created the nymph Nemesis to preserve order, by punishing transgressors, especially against the family. We have created the abstract scientific concept of Entropy in acceptance of, even surrender to, inevitable disorder. Thus:

Entropy	myth	person	order	neuter
Nemesis	science	abstract	disorder	female

Myth pseudo-scientifically reduced to algebra of meaning. When (several months ago) I finished reading Zoline and started this essay, I felt strongly that Zoline's corpus engaged with the notion of nemesis, arguing around that notion we've inherited that there is some absolute justice, some objective integral order governing the affairs of men. Then Saving the World intervened, and now I have only the scribbled hints reproduced above to remind me of what seemed then a vital argument. Which has now disintegrated, a victim, I contend, of Entropy.

Judith Hannah■

"Women are not encouraged to be egocentric, rather our culture conditions us towards sustaining that idealised conflict-free ecology, the nuclear family."

Book Reviews

Edited by Paul Kincaid

Out of Phaze

Piers Anthony

NEL, 1989, 288pp, £11.95, pb £6.95

Piers Anthony seems to be a one-man publishing industry. Certainly he doesn't often stick to one book if he can stretch it to a series of three, four or more. *Out of Phaze* begins a new trilogy set in the twin worlds of Proton/Phaze, the scene of his earlier *Apprentice Adept* books.

The plot is fairly simple. The magical world of Phaze and the scientific world of Proton have been out of touch for some 20 years, but each individual in either world has his counterpart in the other. Mach, the robot son of Citizen Blue, manages to exchange bodies with Bane, son of the Blue Adept. The exchanged pair are pursued by various villains who want to use their ability to communicate between worlds. A basic chase plot ensues, in which Mach is helped by a female shape shifter and Bane by a shape-changing alien. Eventually, the two protagonists fall in love with their respective helpers. Can they possibly remain in the worlds, and what will be the consequences? These questions will no doubt be explored in detail in the following two volumes.

Still, I found the book quite entertaining. It seemed relatively free of some of the faults which have always put me off Anthony, such as the enormous excess of dialogue over action, the near-simplimindedness of some of his characters, his deliberately archaic phraseology, and the slightly prurient depictions of sex both human and alien. Since neither protagonist understands the other's world, there is plenty of scope for that old plot device: "How will he get out of this one?" a venerable but effective way of keeping the pages turning.

The central idea, of exchanging worlds, works well, in that after reading about Bane struggling through Proton, you can be given a section about Mach struggling through Phaze, swapping between the two before either has time to pall. I think it's probably this idea which made the book better than I expected, and certainly better than most of Anthony's output. As ever the style is smooth and competent. If you liked the *Apprentice Adept*, I expect you'll want to have this one. If you just want a pleasant and moderately undemanding fantasy read, then this may be for you too. You'll probably want another one in half an hour, but by then he'll probably have written one.

Gareth Davies

Samraj

Elaine Aron

NEL 1989, 500pp, £12.95 hc, £7.95 pb

There is an historical note at the beginning which sets the story in context. It is helpful, as the story plunges immediately into the action as a 15-year-old girl wakes up not knowing who or where she is. However the plot of this modern retelling of the ancient Indian epic, the *Mahabharata*, is too complex to summarise in a few sentences. Suffice it to say that "Princess Draupadi" marries Prince Yudistira, who is charged with the fate of saving the lands of the Bharata from the Age of Kali.

There are numerous interweaving subplots, as various members of the ruling families conspire for self-aggrandisement and the downfall of others with all the vindictiveness of characters in a modern American soap opera, while the adolescents at the centre struggle to come to terms with growing up and fulfilling the duty expected of them. Adherence to Dharma or duty is a recurring theme of the book. Many of the lesser characters also have their own stories which contribute to the whole.

Apart from the historical note, the time is set by references to other contemporary civilisations, such as Sumer, Babylon, Phoenicia and Egypt. There is little superfluous description of buildings, clothes, customs or laws: Ms Aron likes to get on with telling the tale. She does give her characters time to explore their feelings and give expression to their doubts, occasionally to excess. But this is a small quibble in an otherwise very well paced story.

I read somewhere that historical novels can no longer be marketed as such, and are now sold as Fantasy. This is a pity as *Samraj* is a good historical novel, and will disappoint those in search of sword and sorcery. The list of characters at the end indicates those which do not appear in the original epic, revealing at least one important sub-plot comes from another source. Ms Aron states that her intention is to make the *Mahabharata* more accessible to the modern reader. In fact I found my lack of familiarity with the original very frustrating, so in my case she succeeded. It is a pity that the trilogy as a form has been so debased, that when a story such as this is so complex that it can only be told over three volumes, the reader is automatically discouraged from picking the first book up.

Valerie Housden

The Relativity of Wrong

Isaac Asimov

Oxford, 1989, 225pp, £5.95

This is yet another collection of Isaac Asimov's popular-science essays, and well up to standard. It's divided half and half between chemistry and astronomy. In the latter I'm pleased to see Asimov sticking up for the traditional pronunciation of "Uranus" which even Patrick Moore has stopped using. There is also a final eponymous chapter which explains the nature of scientific modelling, and why there are no fixed truths in the natural sciences. This should be required reading for the many people who believe that science deals with certainties. I can only take issue with Asimov on a few minor details: for instance, the time it takes light to travel a metre is nil, from the light's point of view. Only to the outside observer is the speed of light finite. It's strange that he should discuss the occurrence of DNA mutations (and possible carcinogenesis) caused by the radioactive decay of carbon-14 in living tissue, and not mention the DNA repair mechanisms which tend to offset the damage caused. I wish that Asimov (in common with what appears to be almost the whole population nowadays) would learn the difference between "alternate" and "alternative". Quibbles apart, this is an excellent book.

Darroll Pardoe

Lord Horror

David Britton

Savoy, 1989, 192pp, £10.95

I don't like this book, you should know that from the start. I don't understand it or what the author is trying to achieve. Maybe because I didn't like it I didn't try hard enough but I don't think that's the case.

The characters include Lord Horror, based on Lord Haw Haw, and his two dwarf servants, Meng and Ekker, Meng being a transvestite. Horror is a racist and in particular anti-semitic, he has a duty to rid the world of Jews. We have a scene where Horror uses bodies hung in trees as radio aerials. This is tame compared to the one where he kills a party of Jews - the author describes Horros's use of two razors in graphic and gory detail. If that's not enough for you a further scene describes Horror killing then eating some New York street perverts. Horror's final scene is his death at the hand of the Jew he ate whilst he's encased in a cocoon of shit. If this was meant to instil in me revulsion at anti-semitism it certainly achieved the revulsion but the violence was so over the top any "message" was lost.

We also have the bizarre crew of a fantastical airship who are searching for Hitler. The work on the airship being done by "nigger androids". Was this another attempt to display the evils of racism? I don't know.

And there's Hitler, also called Mugwump or Encarnation Rossa. He has a companion, Old Shatterhand, his penis. But a penis which has increased in size and has a mouth, eye and mind of its own. Eventually the penis

grows until it encircles the Earth and "ejects" Hitler. Hitler is solely interested in modern art, philosophy and psycho-analytical movements and how they inter-relate. He particularly dwells on Schopenhauer. How much of the information given about these is true I don't know, nor do I understand what the author was getting at.

Whilst most of the language is straightforward Britton likes to throw in words like "cryomnesia", "sanguineous", "oneine" and "turbillion", not all of which appeared in my dictionary and I only bothered to look them up because I was doing this review.

I kept asking myself what this book was about and why anyone would want to write it. I would not comment on your right to read it but I would not encourage you to do so.

Tom A Jones

The Synthetics

Karen Clark

Merlin Books, 1988, 52pp, £2.95

It's hard to know what to make of this very slim volume; only 52 pages, and amateur enough for me to suspect it is "vanity publishing".

It's the story of 15-year-old Nika Haversham and her friends Sophie and Liza. It concerns school truancy in 2015 and the drastic punishment meted out to persistent offenders. Nika is a timid, valium addicted schoolgirl and the story reflects her viewpoint - full of self doubt, guilt, adolescent fears and preoccupations with homework. The book starts badly with a misprint in its first paragraph. The plot is unconvincing, but I suppose schooling in 2015 might still involve chalk dust and GCSEs. The ending is frankly absurd. And the story is too slight for the author's flighty turns of phrase.

Stylistically the author has much to learn; each speaker uses a different adjective until it becomes intrusive, Sophie's stutter is laboriously spelled out - I could continue but I think I'm breaking a butterfly upon a wheel. I suggest the author polish up her skills and submit her work to some rigorous criticism before trying the professional market again.

Barbara Davies

The Women & the Warlords

Hugh Cook

Colin Smythe, 1989, 283pp, £10.95

Third Volume of "Chronicles of an Age of Darkness", this juvenile fantasy follows close on the heels of the first two parts and will doubtless be as swiftly followed by the 17 further volumes planned, three of which are even announced on the flyleaf.

Hugh Cook's simple, sparse style provides us with short, sharp sentences, brief paragraphs, snappy dialogue and a wealth of invented words. The two obligatory maps are childishly sketched, the content is mostly thud-and-blunder with a sauce of wizardry, and there are too many people with names like Hor-hor-hurlugmurg for my liking.

Yet there are adult aspects that may upset

prudish parents - for whom, then, is Cook writing his interminable series?

Ken Lake

Mutation

Robin Cook

Macmillan, 1989, 367pp, £11.95

A rather obviously named Dr Victor Frank has carried out genetic experiments on his own unborn son with predictable results. The child, VJ, is an amoral genius, totally without any human sympathy, who proves to be a very real threat to all those around him. This 10-year-old monster has managed to cover his tracks most effectively, though a certain amount of worry and concern remains.

Robin Cook's new medical thriller tells how Victor and his psychologist wife, Marsha, begin much against their will to discover the true nature of their over-resourceful son. Every parent's concerns are, for the Franks, considerably amplified once they begin to link VJ with a trail of corpses.

Cook is not particularly good when it comes to characterisation. Victor is not a success, his motives, responses and relations are never convincingly established. He strains credulity to say the least, experimenting on his own son apparently with no real thought for the consequences then losing interest in the experiment until things start to go wrong. However, Cook's concern is not with character.

The strengths of the book are two-fold. First, Cook does tell a competent detective story, the process whereby the Franks gradually uncover their son's activities does make for a gripping read. Strangely enough, this is despite the fact that everything they find out is absolutely predictable. The reader is there long before they arrive on the scene. Why does the novel nevertheless work?

Which brings us to Cook's second strength: his use of the world of advanced biotechnology as a setting carries the reader along. He successfully converts medical science, with its arcane knowledge and impenetrable language, into an exotic and unfamiliar context on what is a rather hoary old thriller. For example, when Victor confesses to his wife:

"I used genetic engineering to reproduce the protein and isolate the responsible gene. Then for the brilliant part..." He stopped again in front of Marsha. His eyes sparkled. "I took a fertilised Aplysia egg or zygote and after causing a pokit mutation in its DNA, I inserted the new NGF gene along with a promoter. The result?"
"More ganglionic neurons,"
Marsha answered.

Do characters that can talk like this have to be psychologically convincing? For all I know they could be talking complete gibberish, but regardless of this, the medical setting contributes powerfully to the book's success. We know that the little swine has bumped people off, but the excitement and tension is

generated by Victor's scientific detective work, by the unfamiliar world that we are immersed in while he discovers how the dirty deeds were done. Not a Whodunnit, but a Howdunnit!

Within strict limits a competently executed and reasonably successful thriller, then. Personally, though, this is not the sort of book that I would go out of my way to read, although I must confess I did enjoy it.

John Newsinger

Second Variety

Philip K Dick

Gollancz, 1989, 395pp, £12.95

The Gollancz campaign to reprint everything written by the prolific Philip K Dick continues apace. Hot on the heels of *Beyond Lies the Wub*, we are treated to *Second Variety*. In some ways it is the mixture as before. 27 stories this time, in the order in which they were received by the author's agent, with the dates on which they plopped through Scott Meredith's door. On this evidence they were written over less than two years (more than one a month!), although it took a little longer for some of them to get into print.

The mixture is also "as before" in being quintessential Dick of the early 50s - written at the time of the Cold War, many of the stories deal with military themes, post-nuclear gloom, and similar scenarios. (For younger readers, I should stress that Dick was loudly anti nuclear sabre rattling, at a time when the US was far from tolerant of such heresy). And, as with the first collection, there are gimmicks and twists that now seems hackneyed - but only because so many people have followed in the footsteps of Dick, who thought of them first.

To me, *Second Variety* doesn't stand up so well as *Beyond Lies the Wub*. The nostalgia kick of having so much Dick gathered in one collection has gone from the second collection, and, heretical though the thought may be, some of the experiments being tried out by the relatively young writer learning his craft don't seem to work. But I thought I'd try the collection out on someone with a less jaundiced view, and get a second opinion from my 12-year-old son, Ben, whose tastes in SF generally run to Terry Pratchett and Fantasy trilogies. A little to my surprise, he liked it. Better, he said, than the first. The gimmicks, after all, are fresh to him; he likes the twists in the tails of many of the plot; and the element of fantasy in many stories also struck a chord.

The message, I think, is clear. Old hands, like myself, will treasure the collection for its completeness, just as we enjoy listening to the repeat of *Journey Into Space*. Younger readers, unfamiliar with Dick and relatively new to the genre, will probably get the same kick out of the stories (except the more dated Cold War references) as I did 30 years ago - when, I have just realised, I was exactly the age Ben is now. Either way, the publishers, and the Dick estate, have another winner on their hands.

John Gribbin

Scare Tactics

John Farris
 Hodder & Stoughton, 1989, 310pp, £11.95

Earthbound

Richard Matheson
 Robinson, 1989, 186pp, £10.95

The puff on the back of *Scare Tactics* refers to masterfully devious plotting, shatteringly effective use of violence, in-depth characterisation, and scenes of gibbering horror. I have to admit that I couldn't spot any of these. The book includes a complete novel about a political rivalry that ends in attempted murder, and two rather mild pieces that strike me as early work, though I may be wrong. The second, "Horrorshow", is particularly unoriginal in its use of reincarnation, karma, out-of-body experience and other "standard narrative elements", as the kind phrase goes. In all three, plot twists are minimal, characterisation workmanlike but undistinguished, horror virtually non-existent, and as for the violence, apart from one rather gratuitous kid-killing, none of it really made much impression on me, and I tend to be squeamish. So what is going on here?

Look instead at Richard Matheson's book. *Earthbound* has all the elements of a classic ghost story - sinister house, strange apparitions, struggle, confrontation and final sacrifice - put together with an eye for detail and implication you'd expect from the author of the ultimate vampire-explaining novel, *I am Legend*. The only non-standard element is a considerable dash of sex. Matheson no doubt feeling that this area of life after death has been neglected in the literature. The cover, however, depicts a demonic-looking couple quite literally melting into an embrace, while a huge and deformed mouth gapes in the background. Couple that with Farris's cover, which features a bleeding, mutilated teddy bear impaled on a tombstone (I kid you not), and you begin to wonder. It's been said too often that horror is getting more horrific. What seems to be happening here is the reverse; the presentation of the book gives the readers licence to tell themselves they're reading the real stuff, while in fact they haven't got anything that would have shocked Dickens or MR James. Certainly MRJ always renounced gore as a source of fright, preferring to achieve his effect through subtlety, and as a result wrote some genuinely disturbing pieces. These two are sheep in wolf's clothing. Neither of them is actually badly written or a pain to read - Matheson in particular commands my admiration for the polish he brings to such a routine plot - but if you want your blood chilled by them, you'll have to read them in the fridge.

Gareth Davies

The Moon is a Harsh Mistress

Robert A Heinlein
 NEL, 1989, 288pp, £11.95

This was first published in 1966, but the publishers have brought out a new edition and I was interested in my own reactions,

re-reading it after twenty years.

The plot is deceptively simple, the moon has been used much as Australia is - a dumping ground for criminals and dissidents from an Earth that has (it is barely mentioned) had upheavals since the present day. The Luna population consists, when the book starts, of four classes - the ruling hierarchy, the "convicts", the mass of people (ex-convicts and others) who are "free" and settled, and a small number (mainly scientists) who will return to Earth after brief stays.

The hero, Manuel Garcia O'Kelly, is a Luna-born citizen and makes his living repairing computers. His name, and the patois used in the book, help indicate the mixed ancestry of the Luna inhabitants. As the Luna Authority has the most money, Manuel works on their main computer - and finds it has become self-aware. Mix in a few more characters and foment, with the aid of this sentient computer, a rebellion against the Earth's predominance (via the Luna Authority) and the book reels on its way.

Heinlein's power lies in his storytelling - you are swept along past any details that a lesser author would allow you to ponder and disagree with. Thus you enjoy the book to the end and only then (if in meditative mood) can you look back and find fault. The action is, to a certain extent, off-stage and the book encompasses a dozen ideas to stretch a staid person's imagination. Forms of marriage, government and philosophies are detailed and discussed throughout the book like raisins in a cake, and like raisins they add to the overall texture.

Heinlein has been much vilified by critics for the ideas he expressed in his later books. *The Moon is a Harsh Mistress* was, perhaps, one of the books written as he moved from "adventure" SF to the books that were vehicles for eccentric and unconventional ideas. I cannot remember exactly what his reasons were 20 years ago - now I have to say that I enjoyed it but found it a little prolix.

Keith Freeman

The Story of the Stone

Barry Hughart
 Bantam, 1989, 236pp, £6.95

This is a pleasurable read, continuing the adventures of Master Li Kao and his peasant companion Number Ten Ox (from the award-winning *Bridge of Birds*). This Holmes and Watson team travel through Neo-Confucian China looking for the explanation for the apparent return of a malign 750-year-dead Prince who has stolen a forged manuscript from a monastery and killed the librarian. Are there criminals making use of an old legend, or has he really returned from the dead, as he had promised to? And if he has, what has he come back for? What was it about the manuscript that was so important? The chase leads through the folk tales/history of the region, to the fortress of a King who collects special people, and to the land of the dead, a visit that makes a fine centrepiece for the book. The expla-

nation and resolution is satisfyingly transcendent, consistent, and embedded in the (fake?) Chinese occult that has informed the story.

The problem is that it is based in a China that never was. One is never quite sure whether one is reading about "real" beliefs and legends made concrete or about things that the author has concocted, creating a frisson of ambiguity that is not entirely welcome. Further, the characters have one-note (or one-phase) personalities (Number Ten Ox, for example, has an unerring ability to know what any peasant might be thinking in any particular situation) and it is written with a genial sense of humour more to contemporary America than ancient China. None of this would be important except that 17 publishers apparently turned down its predecessor for these reasons, thinking it hard to classify and sell. Indeed, the blurb is one of the most cautious I've read in a long time, and contrives to make the book out as a warrior-type quest when it is in fact a detective story with and about magic.

The writing is robust, the plotting persuasive if a little creaky in places, the characterisation and setting colourful if superficial. The juxtaposition of the analytical mind of Master Li with a fantasy world and crime works well, and has more in common with science fictional investigations of alien artefacts than with the standard Fantasy. One could perhaps wish for a greater sense of strangeness, or a bit of political bite, but those are niggles. A welcome addition to the genre, with its roots, I suspect, in the older tradition of exotic adventure.

Cecil Nurse

Hidden Turnings

Diana Wynne Jones (Ed)
 Methuen, 1989, 180pp, £8.95

There's a good game you can play with this collection. The cover lists the authors represented, but due to quirk of design, the authors are credited at the end of each story, and in the running headline, but not on the title pages, which gives two pages in which to guess their identity. Depending on your familiarity with their work, it's an easy enough task, but I can promise that it will take a little while to pick out the stories by, among others, Diana Wynne Jones herself, Garry Kilworth, and Terry Pratchett, all of whom have produced rather uncharacteristic stories. To be honest, there are no bad stories in this collection, just some which seem stronger to me than others - and then again, you may find that those I dismiss are exactly the ones you like best. It's that sort of collection. The majority of writers are well-known, and turn in excellent examples of their craft. How could anything go wrong?

It's not so much that things go wrong, as that this book is aimed at the uneasy middle ground of teenage fiction. I've never yet been able to decide what function this publishers' label serves, except that it categorises fiction in a way I find unacceptable. There is a goodly amount of perfectly acceptable science fiction and fantasy publish-

ed under juvenile and teenage imprints, and I ask myself how many readers are either deterred by this labelling, or remain blissfully unaware of many literary goodies, because the books have been labelled in such a way that the average adult is unlikely to find them. I would hate to see this excellent collection get lost simply because specialist shops might not stock it, or because children's bookshops aren't a natural browsing habitat for an adult reader. Frankly, I think the whole business of labelling is complete popycock, and that we should be looking out for good, well-written fiction irrespective of the intended audience.

Maureen Porter

Alternities

Michael P Kube-McDowell
Ace, 1989

A Talent for War

Jack McDevitt
Ace, 1989

The Day the Martians Came

Frederik Pohl
St Martin's Press, 1989

For a while there I was having severe problems finding any SF I was able to read. There were loads of short stories to catch up on - Lucius Shepard, Howard Waldrop, Charles Beaumont - but I just couldn't find any novels worth the effort of going beyond the first dozen pages. Then two jumped up and bit me in succession. McDowell got an offish review in *Locus*, with Dan Chow claiming that "McDevitt is no Thucydides or Aeschylus". But who is? What McDevitt has given us is a Space Opera heavy on the opera element with fly-by-night Alex Benedict getting involved in a centuries-old mystery of treason: Christopher Sim was humankind's greatest defender when after thousands of years of galactic expansion we encountered the Ashiyyur, an equally expansionist race. On the eve of the battle that would supposedly turn the tide to mankind's advantage, Sim was betrayed by Ludik Talino and dies in the battle off the planet Abonai. But was it really betrayal, or something altogether different? McDevitt has

written one of the best pieces of extra-terrestrial SF since Cordwainer Smith, and if there is any justice *A Talent for War* will be pushing for every award the science fiction community can bestow.

Also liable to be in the running should be *Alternities*. Somewhere during the early 1950s history has split approximately 20 different ways (we've all read the popular quantum mechanics books now, haven't we?), with a mysterious set of gateways connecting each. One of these alternative Americas has discovered the gates and, after years of playing second fiddle to Russia in the Superpower arms race, decides to try and nuke Moscow whilst the President and Congress slope off through the gate and let the fall-out settle. Kube-McDowell's strong talent for characterisation and linear historical extrapolation makes this all extremely convincing with a cast of characters that one can't help but care about. When Rayne Wallace is captured by security forces in the altercity that is being readied for the President's arrival, his sense of culture shock as he is interrogated about his home time-line and learns the more subtle differences between the two is almost tangible. The "what if?" novel has rarely been done better.

Pohl's *The Day the Martians Came* is a fix-up of stories expanding upon and including his Dangerous Visions contribution "The Day After the Martians Came". It's less a science fiction novel than a social commentary about how various aspects of society would react to discovering life elsewhere in our solar system. It's a rather slight book, but enjoyable nonetheless with plenty of tongue-in-cheek wit, wickedly accurate parody and good characterisation.

David Hodson

Women as Demons

Tanith Lee
Women's Press, 1989, 272pp, £4.95

The Hidden Side of the Moon

Joanna Russ
Women's Press, 1989, 229pp, £4.95

Those who have previously read Tanith Lee and Joanna Russ will need no introduction; these books of short stories are typical. They

could not be more different.

Women as Demons, subtitled "The Male Perception of Women through Spaceand Time", contains 16 stories, all but two previously published. They run the gamut from SF to Fantasy to the macabre. I like the SF best: "The Truce", about two separate races coming together to find a way to continue their species; "You Are My Sunshine", Pygmalion in space with a twist; "The Thaw", the unforeseen consequences of cryogenic suspension; and "Written in Water", a different slant on the last woman on Earth. The other stories are also gripping, perhaps "The Unrequited Glove" and "The Demoness" remaining the most vivid.

Lee's writing style varies depending on her subject matter; her Fantasy and macabre tales are written in a delicate and pastel tone while her SF is more straightforward. All are immensely readable. She is not a didactic feminist, yet she portrays women, whether demoness or unskilled artist, in a sympathetic and revealing way. "Northern Chess" is perhaps most overt in its appeal for equality.

The Hidden Side of the Moon contains 27 pieces, from one to 22 pages long, all previously published. Russ tends towards the mainstream so the SF label is to some extent misleading. There are few SF and Fantasy stories: "Nor Custom Stale", encompassing immortality and the approaching ice age; "Foul Fowl", how invaders meet their match in a Cordon Bleu allegory; and "Elf Hill", about an old people's home large enough to contain 20 million people. Some other pieces are about modern life, others are frankly baffling.

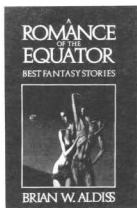
Russ's writing is modern, feminist and idiosyncratic, there is sometimes a self-conscious cleverness to her prose, as when she refers to other women writers; in "It's Important to Believe" she refers to a "You Know Who" who committed suicide in Britain in 1941 - surely a reference to Virginia Woolf, but why the mystery? I would be lying if I said I enjoyed more than a few of her stories.

So there you have it. I wholeheartedly recommend *Women as Demons*, but *The Hidden Side of the Moon* is an acquired taste.

Barbara Davies



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The Hormone Jungle

Robert Reed
Orbit, 1989, 300pp, £6.99

It has been difficult not to write an extremely vitriolic review of this book. Because I do expect respect for a reader's intellect. Here I was annoyed by background items which left nothing to my imagination. For example, *fat burning chemicals* to reduce unwanted fat; and it seems *Hyperfibre* is anything the author can't be bothered to think up another substance or name for. But, worst of all, while the setting - a future version of our solar system - is indicated in a well judged passage on the opening page, and more plainly stated on page 23, it is then stated baldly again on page 75. While I realise the author wants to be sure the audience is with him, it has to be said that in fact this could have been any colonised planetary system, and thus these details are irrelevant.

Moving from background to the foreground, the characters are dull. Not that they aren't potentially fascinating - a "Neoamerindian" man, a genetically altered merman, a cyborg from Venus, and an android where, all in some way fleeing their pasts, make a lively mix. But all four motivated by petty concerns: lust, greed, revenge or childishness. Of course the novel is more complex than this, but not enough to notice. What finally annoyed me the most was that where the physical details are explained in almost painful detail, the moral, emotional, political and ethical questions are mostly side-stepped, ignored or fudged.

If we were to compare it to the cyberpunk canon (and I think we are meant to - there are shades of *Schismatrix*, *Software* and *Neuromancer* here) then it would compare most closely with Shiner's *Frontera*. For while there are undoubtedly some wonderfully inventive ideas here, even as Shiner's book was essentially a story of woman-stealing and revenge, so the plot here seems to have been lifted whole from a gangster movie of the 1930s, and the SF setting is thus totally irrelevant.

I normally read a book for review twice. I can think of no worse thing to say than that I could hardly bear to finish this one the first time. Rereading passages, I can see there is a coherence which is not immediately obvious. However, the central concerns seem to be simply too trivial for the weight of the background on which they are set. I am disappointed to see Reed has had two further novels published. I will not be seeking them out.

The Road to Paradise

Keith Roberts
Kerosina, 1988, 228pp, £13.95, Collector's edition £37.50

Roberts has changed genres with this novel, leaving SF to venture into a detective story with, I'm sad to say, somewhat disappointing results. Detective stories are expected to abide by one major rule - not to pull a rabbit out of a hat to present the reader with a surprise final unveiling, the author is

expected to leave information available for the astute reader to uncover. In some ways Roberts has done this, he mentions the culprit and mentions the reasons, but there is no sense of a jigsaw puzzle completed, the realisation of whodunit. Instead I felt cheated. It may be that others will disagree violently with me and regard this as a totally successful detective story. For me it wasn't that I guessed the ending, I often fail to follow clues but am usually able to see their importance afterwards - this time it left me blank.

That is not to say that the story is bad. Roberts' writing is, as always, charming, deceptively simple and a delight to read. Maggie, the central character, is equally charming, but not complete. There are too many loose ends - her husband is the paralysed victim of an accident, we never see him, he has no function in the story, so why is he there? She is meant to be a lapsed Catholic - why? Roberts can and should know many things about his characters which will effect how he writes about them and how they behave, but he need only tell us what is relevant, what forms her character for us and what tells the story he is aiming to tell. If the character has more than one story in her then tell two stories, don't overload inessential information into one. There are, for instance, lists of items from the story, specifics about her hi-fi system and other things which distracted me and turned into an irritant, as did some of the details of her historical research which have no bearing on the story. Perhaps I am limiting it too much by expecting it to conform to a detective story norm, but that seems to be what it wants to be, and it is too discursive, too rambling, too unfocused to be completely successful.

Having been largely negative I'd like to redress the balance somewhat by saying that I still enjoyed the book, but just felt disappointed at the ending. However, I would still recommend it if it comes your way, even flawed it is better than many books you will come across.

Helan McNabb

Irish Encounters

Keith Roberts
Kerosina, 1988, 80pp

Keith Roberts, perhaps more than any other British SF writer, has made the landscape a character in his books. A rich appreciation of the history embedded in the countryside, and the way it shapes the people who live there, is fundamental to all his most successful works, from *Pavane* to *Grainne*. It was perhaps inevitable, therefore, that at some point he should essay a travel book. This too slim volume is the result.

It is a record of a week spent in Ireland in 1978, a lone driving tour that took him from Dublin to Kilkenny, Waterford, Cork, Kilmalkey and back to Dublin, with a visit to Tara on the way. The run-down towns, ancient castles and stunning scenery are captured with expected ease. But any good travel book is essentially a book of human

encounters, and in this Roberts, with an apparent ability to fall readily into conversation with anyone in a bar or guest house, is well served by the outgoing and idiosyncratic Irish character. Though Roberts' own character comes more obviously into the book than in anything else he has written, it is not obtrusive, and it is a relatively easy thing to go beyond his quirks and see what he is seeing.

And this volume of travel recollections and extracts from his notebook, is of particular interest because it was on this trip that the idea of *Grainne* took shape. Nevertheless, despite his obvious fascination with the Celtic, I can't help feeling that Roberts is never more than an outsider on the periphery of Ireland. Some time I would love to see him produce a travel book on the West of England, that would really be worth reading.

Paul Kincaid

The Gold Coast

Kim Stanley Robinson
Orbit, 1989, 389pp, £6.99

A recent documentary on the propensity of wealthy Californians to spend large amounts of cash on psychics, mediums, astrologers and the like, prompted an inversion of the old cliché: if they're so stupid, why are they rich?

Here is Kim Stanley Robinson's *The Gold Coast*, another glimpse, if rather more sympathetic, into the Californian mind. Robinson's "utopia", set some 50 years hence, is at once beguiling - in its several meanings - and disturbing, and so provides a perfect comment on the world's fifth richest nation, should it ever secede from the rest of the US, as it is today.

I'm not sure if that's what Robinson had in mind, however. He seems to be attempting the impossible, writing the perfect social novel of manners set in a society quite divorced from our own. What he succeeds in doing is producing his best novel and probably the finest I will read all year.

California next century is a world of, inevitably, designer drugs, cars, hedonism, wall-to-wall videos - it is socially acceptable to collect your own library of previous sexual encounters - surfing, and yet more designer drugs.

Robinson's previous books have impressed me by his willingness to take chances in avoiding the easy cliché - think of how a Clarke or a Niven would have dealt with the central idea in *Icchenge*, giant sanskrit ideograms found inscribed on Pluto. But he has disappointed with a slow, cloyed prose style and a fundamental lack of warmth towards his characters.

All this has changed in *The Gold Coast*. The writing moves on with all the smooth pace of an automatic car on the endless freeways, while it is a measure of affection he inspires for his characters that as the book nears its end and their lives begin to go awry, I genuinely feared for some inevitable bloodbath which we are fortunately spared.

We follow the fortunes of four close friends, up to the breaking of the friendship. The main character, Jim, is a misfit, at odds with his father whom he sees as part of the industrial-military complex which keeps the world on the brink of war. He drifts into casual terrorism, unwittingly encouraged and supplied by the forces he believes he is fighting, before the break up of his one true sexual relationship and a trip abroad to less fortunate parts than Orange County, show him the reality of the society of which he is a part.

So far, so simple. But Jim is fascinated by Orange County's past, by how it became how it is, and his researches provide him with an eventual meaning to his life.

Robinson achieves the much sought after science fiction novel about relationships, a mature, warm and engaging work set within a context which is well-rounded and believable. We will be lucky to see its like again.

Martin Waller

Dark Night in Toyland

Bob Shaw
Gollancz, 1989, 190pp, £11.95

Don't skip the introduction. Shaw has things to say about how the storyteller's, particularly the SF storyteller's, imagination works. He makes some distinction between the deliberately market-manufactured story and one brought into being by "an inspirational bolt from the unknown". Of these 15 stories many bear hallmarks of the former category. A punning play on words, as in "Hue and Cry" and "Well-Wisher", or a semantic ambiguity, as in "Dissolute Diplomat", achieve denouements or punch lines that make you think "cleverly contrived", but don't take you a great deal further. Other stories evoke admiration of the ingenuity with which a well-worn theme or structure is deployed afresh: the "three-wishes" plot in "Go on, Pick a Universe"; that same plot combined with the Faust motif in "To The Letter". Such stories, though doing little to change perspectives or prompt a sense of wonder, are excellent as entertainments. There is a pleasure in savouring the process by which two or more disparate ideas are fused to produce yet another as the emerging and significantly dominant one.

An example is "Courageous New Planet". The element of *Brave New World* pastiche is only slightly sketched, but as context for the conjunction of two motifs - football hooliganism and robot simulacra - (present realism juxtaposed with future-oriented speculation) it works well and gives allusive point to the irony of the story's ending. Shaw is a good teller of tales and can gear his easy narrative style to a surprising variety of moods and modes. "The K-Y Warriors" is an exercise in sardonic black humour; "Aliens Aren't Human" edges quirkily into super-alien and space opera territory; "Shadow of Wings" has an Arabian-nights flavour. This last named story is one ("Well-Wisher" is another) in which

future history has latent existence in a fantastically imagined past.

The title story, as the Introduction indicates, is of the "inspirational bolt" type. It is superbly structured. Two oppositional concepts (the organic/the artificial) are objectified in another pair (the mortal/the robotic), a classic horror-fantasy of the undead then evolving out of these inter-relationships. "Stormseeker", too, bears the stamp of inspiration - of insight into correspondences between founding lightning strike and orgasm, these made referent to the gulf separating the inhumanly cosmic from the emotionally human. Here poetic imagery presaged certain flight descriptions in *The Ragged Astronauts*, then 14 years ahead. Spanning over 25 years, this collection is a mixture of such "flash-point" stories and the dexterously formulaic.

KV Bailey

To the Land of the Living

Robert Silverberg
Gollancz, 1989, 308pp, £12.95

This excellent, profuse, and in places very funny book contains the best way of frightening a Calvinist minister. Tell him it doesn't really matter what you do when you are alive, and that in the Afterworld (as Silverberg calls it) you will have a ball. You can do anything you like, because all you'll do is die again, to be reborn in another part of the same plane. Your soul is, in fact, indestructible.

Gilgamesh, king of ancient Sumer and he of the epic poem, is our guide. He keeps losing is bosom companion, Enkidu, and this causes him to move around the vast Afterworld in perpetual search during the times of their separation. It is during such a search that an adoring Robert Howard takes him for Conan.

The shifting geography of the Afterworld could have a lot to do with this confusion because, despite having just about everyone who has ever been anyone on hand, presumably including Mercator, no reliable maps exist. The overall level of uncertainty which this creates is comparable to waiting eternally for a minicab.

Of course, in the Afterworld as much as anywhere else it matters whom you mix with. Gilgamesh refers to the rowdy dead from our own age as the "later dead", in much the same way as a Surrey matron might refer to the *nouveau riche* of Surbiton.

How will some director be able to resist filming this book, if one vestige of the cinematic spirit which made *The Ten Commandments* remains? Any film would have to be on such a scale. The cast ranges from the literally antediluvian "hairy men" to HP Lovecraft, Mao, Caesar and Queen Elizabeth I. In each case the rulers try to recreate in the Afterworld the same setup they had on Earth. Gilgamesh, to his surprise, finds his ancient city of Uruk, and rules it for a while. The real problem for most of the characters is that none of their experiences seem quite so acute as once they were and they long to be real again: hence the search for the gateway

to the Land of the title.

Silverberg has used the twin themes of ancient monarchy (*The Gate of Worlds*) and re-incarnation (*Recalled to Life*) before, but neither of those books have the broad sweep of this one and the message may be that whatever morality one aspires to should not be a product of the fear of eternal torment or reward. What would happen to human society if it could be guaranteed that being dead could be this much fun?

Michael Fearn

Bugs

John Sladek
Macmillan, 1989, 213pp, £12.95

Sladek is an author it seems churlish not to like. He works so hard at being funny in an arena almost devoid of humour and is manifestly on the side of angels (not that he believes in such infestations). It is with reluctance, therefore, I confess to finding *Bugs* a most disappointing novel.

Manfred Jones, an English novelist, is absurdly employed writing software for an elusive MidWest company with an existentialist robot on their hands, heavy military involvement, foreign interest and a staff you'd enter Bedlam to avoid. All the pieces are here, but they don't seem to fit together. The madcap plot doesn't so much as explode as plod to its obvious, inevitable conclusion. The farcical waltz of characters is about as rib tickling as a summer season of "Run For Your Wife" - nothing surprises, and Manfred himself is an unbearable wimp. Even the robot - whose name changes from M to Robinson (oh very droll, Mr Sladek...) never achieves, say, the morbidity of a Marvin of the pathology of a HAL.

The real problem is that this book is a combination of two well-trodden paths - the robot story and the Candidate story - and previous stories, including Sladek, have mined a much funnier vein. Robinson is a pale shadow of Roderick. Jones is an even paler shadow of Burgess' Enderby. Even Jones' run down apartment calls to mind Eliot Rosewater's hotel room. And the list goes on.

Which may be the key to this book. This is not a genre work, designed for enthusiasts who know Sladek's previous work, who recognise all the references and borrowings. *Bugs* is for the reader who never reads SF but wants the frisson of reading that Hitchcock is not invincible. I may not particularly like this book but if it succeeds in opening Sladek's other works to a wider audience then I wish it every success.

Martyn Taylor



Deep Quarry

John E. Stith
Ace, 1989, 140pp, \$3.50

The SF detective story mostly comes in two forms. One relies on the SF element to bolster the plot - "Aha!" cried Holmes. "But a Golgafrinchin frug could have easily inserted a tentacle through the keyhole of the locked room...". The second is a strict substitution - Golgafrinchin as Chinatown, and down these mean streets a frug must go.

John Stith's *Deep Quarry* slips easily into the second category, and fairly tedious reading it makes to anyone raised on Chandler, Hammet and the masters. This is essentially a third-rate detective pot-boiler, with a third-rate "discovery of a huge alien artefact" yarn grafted ineptly on.

Tankur is mildly interesting because it does not turn respective of its sun, so it is always the same time of day on the planet. Dallid is pretty uninteresting as town, though. "BugEye" Takent, the private dick hired to investigate the disappearance of alien artefacts from an archaeological site outside the town, is really dull, never short of a hard-boiled quip and always ready for a good kicking when the plot requires it. The three alien races - Derjons, Wompers and Ventons - fell out of a convenient comflake packet. Various people end up dead. The reader ends up reading something else.

This really is pretty drek stuff. John Stith apparently makes a habit of this kind of thing, but shouldn't.

Martin Waller

In the Drift

Michael Swanwick
Legend, 1989, 214pp, £10.95 hc, £4.95 pb

Civilisation is a narrow bridge over the abyss of horror. Time weakens the bridge, too heavy a load could make it collapse. In the *Drift* is set after the meltdown at Three Mile Island, and the release of heavy radiation has devastated Pennsylvania, separating New England from the south and west. With its links broken down, government and civilisation collapses. The *Drift* is the area in which no-one with any brains lives voluntarily. Mutants breed there, trading partners cross it, cities attempt to annex it, but all in all the bone-seeking nucleotides mean that anything to do with it will end in an unpleasant death.

In this world of barbarism, new barbarian chieftains arise like Keith Piotrowicz - half warlord, half Tammany hall, cunning, plotting and scheming. Philadelphia is ruled by the Mummies, a sort of grotesque Rotary Club with a taste for burnings at the stake who want life very much to go on as before (with the addition of their new-found public entertainment).

Equally, new life forms arise to resist the old order who are persecuting the mutants. Samantha Laing, the vampire, and her thaumaturgic daughter, Victoria, resist the corruption of the Mummies, fighting for a new industrial order, in a village they call Utopia. This leads them to war but leads them also

to try to find another way to restore civilisation and the better life.

In the Drift is a bridge of a book whose reach exceeds its grasp, failing to meet in the middle and at least sometimes failing to hide it. The way that it changes its treatment of characters is typical of this. The first chapter introduces Piotrowicz, has him shunned and hunted, and then completely reverses his position. It's a Dick Whittington story. Except that he then becomes an enemy of the goo vampire Samantha, and the persecutor of her daughter, Victoria.

Swanwick's changing point of view means that the reader never knows what's going to happen and that keeps them reading, but it also means that no-one can ever really know with whom they're meant to identify. Perhaps this is possible, it may be that it won't be bodies that corrupt and mutate after meltdown, it will be standards.

The five chapters of *In the Drift* are five episodes in a period of 40 or so years and they show that no matter how long a life someone has they will not see a bridge built back from humanity to civilisation.

LJ Hurst

Bare Bones:

Conversations on Terror with Stephen King

Tim Underwood & Chuck Miller (Eds)
New English Library, 1989, 217pp, £10.95

An interview with an author fascinates me because of what it reveals about his views of himself and his work. String lots of interviews, conducted over eight years, together and you see how his style and world-view develop. After reading these interviews (spanning 1979-87) we know what frightens King (the dark), what he thinks of Stanley Kubrick's treatment of *The Shining* (not a lot) and many other things besides.

The book is divided into broad categories. "Skeletons in the Closet" deals with King's own fears; "Building Nightmares" looks at the way he handles the content of his stories; "Terror Ink" examines his motivations in wanting to scare people; "Hollywood Horror" deals with the visual treatment of his work; "Partners in Fear" contains joint interviews with King and Peter Straub on aspects of their collaboration. *The Talsman*; "Dancing in the Dark" looks at how King sees his work in relation to society in general; and "Bad Seed" covers general things, like King's reasons for buying his own radio station.

Once you get used to the question-and-answer style (and the differences between the talk given in a Public Library and the Playboy interview) the book becomes very readable, but this is spoiled by a serious flaw. None of the interviews are dated in the text and there is no bibliography. Several times, King talks about work in progress or recently published work, and proper dating of the interviews and publication dates of the novels would be a great help in setting the things said in context of the stuff being written.

I like to get inside the mind of an author,

so I enjoyed this book. If you feel like that, you'll like this. If you just want a good read without worrying about what the author thought he was writing, leave this alone.

Jon Wallace

Salvage Rites

Ian Watson
Gollancz, 1989, 223pp, £11.95

Ian Watson's latest collection of short stories spans the years 1984-88 and comes from such varied sources as *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine* and *Interzone*. The subject matter is equally diverse, ranging from horror in "The Mole Field" through myth in "The Legend of the Seven who Found the True Egg of Lightning" to SF in "The Moon and Michelangelo".

Comparing this book with the collection *The Very Slow Time Machine* (published 10 years ago in 1979) shows that Watson's work has lost none of its bleakness:

It was a fact of history that he arrived in 1985 ragged, gibbering and lunatic - tortured beyond endurance by being deprived of us.

"The Very Slow Time Machine" (1978). Yes, they got by, on the income from the grocery shop. They were able to pay the interest on their debts, which lodged with them like a greedy, infirm uncle; like a senile, crippled mother who stopped them from ever going on holiday.

"Salvage Rites" (1987)

In *Salvage Rites* Watson relies less on the mysticism that is such a characteristic of his earlier work, building instead on projections and distortions of the material universe. This "realism" emphasises the starkness of the view of SF and modern horror shown to us in these stories. And while the genres and subjects are a mixed bunch, this bleakness and a certain fatalism tie them together into a collection to prey on the mind. The characters, while seeming occasionally to be just the right stereotype, serve to heighten this. But such diverse people as Peter Catlow, the worried mason of "The Moon and Michelangelo" and Linda, the Agatha Christie fan from "The Emir's Clock", manage on the whole to strike a balance and have enough flesh to make the reader shiver at their predicament as the idea unfolds. And the ideas themselves are disquieting enough to spark the odd nightmare.

He wished he had closed the hatchback down. Otherwise something more precious than junk might escape, might be snatched or simply drift away into the chilly air here between these looming steel boxes that mockingly imitated a decrepit city street - from the future, perhaps, after a war.

"Salvage Rites"

A thought provoking collection, the best being "The Moon and Michelangelo" and the worst being "Aid from a Vampire".

Jon Wallace

Terraplane

Jack Womack

Unwin, 1989, 227pp, £12.95

Regarding William Gibson's back cover blurb: "synes ultraviolet cyberpunk tropes with an achingly nostalgic alternate-world/time-travel riff, Nikola Tesla, the Tunguska flu, the music of Robert Johnson, and *makes it work*," (his emphasis). All I can say is: it *didn't work* for me.

The most extraordinary thing about the novel is the warped version of the English language used in both narrative and dialogue, which can make comprehension of what is going on almost impossible. Simple examples are: "You vizzed?" for "You saw?", "Who awared you?" for "Who made you aware?", and the archaic-sounding: "Such folly amazed". But some sentences simply do not repay the effort of trying to understand them, such as this, which I reread several times:

"It is the obvious inference," she said. "That the ones investigated brutally murdered all members of the investigating party might conceivably convince them entirely." (p187)

Luther, Jake and Oktobriana are transferred from a 21st Century Moscow even more dystopian, crowded, polluted and violent to a 1939 alternate world version of New York. They have the problem of getting back. After much violence, involving a chainsaw amongst other weapons, Luther, at least, gets back by means of a Tesla coil and lightning. (An idea becoming familiar in recent SF.)

We are told very little about the world from which they come and what we are told about 1939 New York will chiefly be of interest to New Yorkers. Much surprise is expressed by Luther at their dangerous habit of smoking.

From the viewpoint of 1939, the futuristic visitors are scarcely human with their slangy language and apparent absence of normal feelings. Unfortunately, this means that they do not appear human to the reader either. Jake can bend coins double between thumb and finger. Well into the novel, we are told that Luther (who sounds adolescent) is a general. Oktobriana can hardly be visualised at all.

The novel is 90% dialogue. Basically it is a sick, macho fantasy with little to say about the human condition. The author seems to lose no opportunity to be obscure. But there are times when this, along with his obvious desire to experiment with language, results in what is almost avant-garde poetry. Jack Womack lives in New York. This is his second novel.

Jim England

Stormwarden

Janny Wurts

Grafton, 1989, 378pp, £12.95 hc, £7.95 pb

Another Fantasy trilogy, *The Cycle of Fire*, has hit the bookshops. Volume One initially appears to be set once upon a time in a land far away, and tells of the struggle between a good male sorcerer, the Stormwarden, and the wicked female sorcerer, Tathagres. She takes Emien, a boy with a huge inferiority complex, as her squire, while the Stormwarden adopts the boy's young crippled sister, Taen, carelessly lets himself be buried under a mountain of ice and magically summons his former ally's heir, yet another inadequate adolescent called Jaric, to his aid. Thus the stage is set for three tedious rites of passage when Taen is abruptly abducted by servo mechanisms, hydraulic lifts, robots and other dated trappings of good old-fashioned space opera, all under the control of a sophisticated starship computer.

Well, it is an interesting idea, marooning human beings and another alien race on a planet whose indigeneous life is inherently demonic; the sum of human knowledge being kept by a computer who manipulates myth and legend to protect that knowledge by masking extraordinary abilities as magic. Unfortunately this idea is not explored very

deeply, the magic when used, either by harnessing the powers of mysterious crystals or the innate abilities of the demons, remains the stuff of fantasy not science. We do not get clear pictures of either the aliens or the demons, who seem to have to be repressed so that mankind can survive. The "SF" elements are merely a gimmick to differentiate this very ordinary sword and sorcery novel from the rest.

Neither is Wurts a particularly good writer. Her purple prose describes a limited number of frequently repeated images, (I gave up counting the number of "surly, curled lips" or "closed angry, violet eyes"), she spends far too long reviewing the situation, and although there is an obvious contrast in the development of the two initially similar characters of Emien and Jaric, the one becoming almost irredeemably evil, the other overcoming his failings, developing his inner strengths, etc; her people remain essentially stereotypes. The plot is predictable and the action so leaden that it is likely that the Stormwarden will remain trapped under the ice until the end of volume three. If the other two books are of the same standard the whole trilogy should be buried with him.

Valerie Housden



The Alternative Editorial



Kingsley Amis describes in his Foreword of *New Maps of Hell* (Four Square 1963) his discovery of SF at the age of twelve (or so):

"... the first cover of many-eyed and -tentacled monsters was enough assurance for me... that this was the right kind of stuff."

Such a feeling I think we're all familiar with, that first encounter. It brings back fond memories perhaps tinged with embarrassment; fumbling in the dark, intense nervous excitement, and all over far too soon. Sometimes I have to cringe: did I *really* read and enjoy all those Moorcock books, and Niven, and Conan - those books which now seem (to me) like poorly written juveniles? Well, yes I did, and it's because that I did that I continue to read SF and Fantasy.

But it was that fantastical element which attracted me to SF in the first place, because it was so different, because it stretched my young and fertile imagination beyond its normal bounds (unlike the few Thrillers and War books that I had read previously). This brings me back to Kingsley Amis, continuing from the above quote:

"This strongly suggests, at least, that what attracts people to science fiction is not in the first place literary quality in the accustomed sense of the term."

For the SF fan, an addict in every sense of the word, it's that fantastic sense of wonder which is primarily the quality which feeds the addiction. We read more and more of the stuff, always searching for something new that will satisfy our needs. And as the years pass, our tastes become more and more refined, our needs are greater and more difficult to satisfy. We turn away from the books which originally caught us, let them gather dust on the shelves. We become nostalgic and look back with fondness at that "Golden Age", never really being able to let go of the hold that those early works had had upon us, and then we turn to pastures new.

"Literary quality" comes later, as our tastes change and as we ourselves change with the world around us. *Escapism is no longer enough.*

Looking at my own book-shelf and the books that I've recently read, I find myself wondering what had originally attracted myself to the genre, why I continued to read within it. And also the "literary quality" of the books that I read these days.

To pick three at random: Lucius Shepard's *Life During Wartime*, Steve Erickson's *Days Between Stations* and *Desolation Road* by Ian McDonald. Stylistically, these are three very different books by three stylistically very different authors. The Shepard is deeply ingrained with post-Vietnam influence; the Erickson, heavy with surreal symbolism; the McDonald, a rich technicolour romp on an alternate, future Mars. Each tells us different things about ourselves as individuals, about the societies that we live in. Such is a common advantage with SF and Fantasy, the opportunity to shift pers-

pective to give hidden insights into the real world. But SF is more than this; for instance, a novel with the theme of the social consequences and horrors of war doesn't need to be written in an SF mode - a novel based in Vietnam with no fantastic element would surely suffice.

And it's interesting to note that only *Desolation Road* is based on another world and actually labelled as "SF"; yet, I would claim each for the genre. The Shepard and Erickson only appear at first glance to be fringe works, but there is a definite link with them and the books which originally brought SF to my attention. Moorcock's *Hawkmoon* books and Niven's *Known Space* series, for instance, are no comparison in terms of literary quality - they have little to say about the human condition, the real world in which we live. But all the books display a great deal of imaginative muscle, and a certain amount of which is required by the reader, unlike a spy thriller set in Berlin, for example. We all know Berlin, it exists here in the same time and space as we do, and we've seen photographs of the Wall, or films, or some of us have even been there. But we've never seen Urth, or Arrakis, or the *Sprawl* - except in our mind's eye, of course.

It is this that links authors as diverse as Shepard and Moorcock and Erickson and Niven and McDonald (not mention Wolfe, Ballard, Vance etc...): *Imagination.*

There really is no fiction genre quite like SF and its associated fields, no genre which allows for such a wide variety of styles. SF knows no boundaries, it is not restricted by style or setting as with Thrillers or Westerns, for example. This is not to say that SF is without its hackneyed themes and ideas, its standard plots and cardboard characterisation, nor is it to say that imagination is the be-all-and-end-all of SF. But we must actively encourage imaginative thought, because without imagination we will see more "As good as Tolkien at his best" trilogies, more prequels of sequels and sequels of prequels; more reshapes of classic "Golden Age" SF stories, padded to novel length by newer and younger writers for a minor credit beneath the original author's name.

SF comes from the imagination, and imagination is where SF's future lies. It's imagination which put men on the moon, to invent the Atomic Bomb, the transistor, the home computer, robots.... SF, though many may like to claim so, did none of these things, but it bore the imaginative catalyst necessary to make such things possible.

Intelligent, well-written SF is important, and for many of us it's also important to have one foot placed firmly in the present, that it bear some significance on our lives. But it's the imagination in the fiction that we read that makes us actually read it, that magic stuff that rekindles our sense of wonder, because without it SF is dry and tasteless. Without imagination we become less than human, and every time I read a good novel it reminds me of what I am, who I am, what I am capable of - if only I use my imagination.