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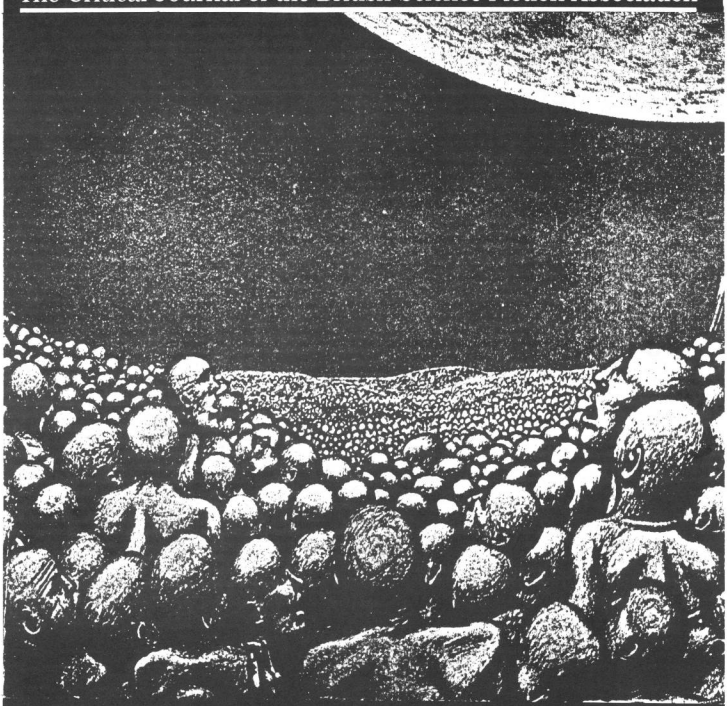

● John Brunner Speaks Out ●
● Paul J. McAuley Interviewed ●

Vector

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Cover taken from John Brunner's **Stand On Zanzibar** (Arrow, 1969)

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Editorial

by KevMcVeigh

Earlier this week I picked up a book to read on the bus in the mornings, having trained myself into that pattern so as not to waste two hours every day. On this particular morning I was tired, and spent the first part of my journey just looking at the book rather than reading it, which is why I came to pay more attention than I usually would to the back cover blurb. It quoted Isaac Asimov:

> Science fiction depends on young authors, new writers who have radically novel styles and fashions that are being forged in the stress and heat of the 1980s.

I'd agree with that sentiment, as I'm sure we all would. My problem comes when I note that the author, Neil Barrett Jr, has been a professional writer for 20 years or more. In fact, he sold his first story in 1959. So we have a problem: how is it that an author can still be considered "new" nearly 30 years after his debut? If it were the case that Barrett had sold very little since 1959, until recently, then perhaps his "rediscovery" might be understandable. This isn't the case. Neil Barret Jr has published at least seven sf novels, and dozens of stories. I admit that these aren't all very good, though that isn't really the issue because enough of them were good enough to attract critical attention. What matters is that it doesn't seem to be enough.

Would it somehow be tolerable if Barrett's situation was unique, if he was somehow the only one to have slipped through the net? It is said that there will always be a publisher for a good novel, but I am unconvinced. KW Jeter's **Dr Adder** languished in assorted editorial in-trays for ten years just as Barrett's **Through Darkest America** did. Who was publishing James P Blaylock or RA Lafferty in the UK until Les Escott at Morrigan? What have Bantam done to support Ian McDonald, or Methuen for Helen Wright? It's all very well publishing new authors but they need publicising as well -- and surely the returns on advertising a new author are more significant than pushing David Eddings or Douglas Adams, writers who will sell thousands whatever promotion they get? If one great book evades our eye haven't we lost something, however many others we catch?

I've been thinking about this for some time, but a friend who has been involved in sf professionally for years recently commented to the effect that most people in British sf have a tendency to ignore new authors unless they happen to be friend, or someone they know through conventions and other gatherings. I thought about this, and realised that it wasn't untrue.

At least in the US there are publishers making a distinct effort to promote new writers -- the late Terry Carr's Ace Specials picked up Gibson, Robinson and Shepard of course; Congdon & Weed put out the "Isaac Asimov Presents" series which featured John Barnes and Judith Moffett, as well as the aforementioned Neil Barrett Jr; and Bantam Spectra's New Fiction and Special Editions series have published Ian McDonald, Lucius Shepard, and Patricia Geary. Each of these lines has been presented in a consistent fashion, clearly identifying the series to the customer (if not always in a fashion I personally found attractive). In the UK the Gollancz classics had a specific identity for a while, but currently only Unwin Hyman seem to have put any effort into brand identification.

Colin Greenland recently wrote an article for **The Face** (March 1990) about some of the new British writers, some of whom might well be labelled "The **Interzone** Generation", without coming to any firm conclusions. In the latest issue of **IZ**, David Pringle sets out to "reply" to Colin's piece, which was entitled "In Search of the Technogoth." **Vector** readers will have realised that Technogoth came and went within these pages long before either **The Face** or **IZ** caught on to it. Whereas Greenland recognises the irony inherent in Charles Stross' proposed movement, Pringle seems to have taken Stross at face value. In fact Pringle seems very defensive about the whole article, which is strange considering the compliments paid by Greenland to **IZ**. Nevertheless, Pringle is upset by all the **IZ** "discoveries" that were omitted by the article -- his references to Paul J McAuley and Neil Ferguson may be correct, but elsewhere the attempts at self-congratulation are disturbingly obvious. Pringle cites Keith Brooke's recent three-book deal with Gollancz, and also lists Simon Ings as an **IZ** discovery; at the time of Brooke making his sales he had published just one story in **IZ** ("Adrenotropic Man"), whilst Ings did gain his first sale to **IZ** ("The Braining of Mother Lamprey") but by the time it had appeared he had already published several more stories and sold a novel to Unwin Hyman. I don't wish to attack **IZ**, certainly it appears to be regaining the quality which faded in issues around the late 20s, but these claims detract from the good work they have done for new British writers such as Nicola Griffith and Eric Brown.

David Pringle may be right to say that this is a good time for young British writers, though the evidence is conflicting. Publishers appear to be pruning their lists and aiming for blockbusters, yet a string of new novelists are making their mark -- Anne Gay, Gill Alderman, Paul J McAuley, and Storm Constantine have all attracted considerable attention for their debut novels. Unfortunately others have gone unnoticed amidst the fantasy epics: Helen Wright's promisingly clever space opera **A Matter of Oaths** made **Locus**' list of recommended first novels of the year, the only British book to do so, yet it has been ignored by reviewers and only one specialist sf bookshop has promoted it at all. I have to ask, is this really a case of "who you know" being most important? Nobody knows anything about her, she isn't seen at conventions, so they can get away with ignoring her book? I hope not, I hope it is merely incompetence by Methuen -- we're used to publishing idiosyncrasies and can go some way to dealing with them.

Despite all this, I remain optimistic about sf in the 90s, having read enough good novels this year to maintain my enthusiasm for a while; but I worry that many of those have been US paperbacks, without any British editions or with British editions that were issued and promptly forgotten by their publisher. I've read books I disliked too, as ever, some of which are mentioned here because I recognise their quality. These are good novels and collections by Michaela Roessner, Dan Simmons, Lewis Shiner, Karen Joy Fowler, Tim Powers, Jack Dann, Pat Cadigan, Leigh Kennedy, Suzy McKee Charnas, and Carter Scholtz, and there must be many more that I've missed too. British authors such as Ian McDonald, Paul J McAuley and Tanith Lee have had their work appearing in US editions before the UK editions come out; critically acclaimed and award-winning fiction takes several years to cross the Atlantic, though Howard Waldrop and Charles DeLint are finally in print (or about to be) over here.

So if it is true that a good novel will eventually be published by somebody, and as I said, I'm sceptical about this, what will prevent them going the way of some of these authors I've mentioned? Do **Vector** readers only want to see coverage of books they can get in WH Smith's, or are you all familiar

with the large number of shops and mail order dealers who stock older titles, and newer imports which may never see UK editions? Would you like to see **Vector** reviewing the most significant of these occasionally? I would. Do you, for instance, really want a full review of the 9th book in a series by David Eddings? Would you rather see a review of a brand new, previously unknown writer? After all, if you don't know what to expect from Eddings by book 9, then is the review really going to help? On the other hand, new authors need support (and too few publishers are prepared to give it) and readers need a better guide than cover blurbs. I believe there is more of critical value to be said about Pat Murphy or Allen M Steele in the 90s than Anne McCaffrey or Arthur C Clarke in the 70s. What do you think?

Kev McVeigh

Letters

Chung Kuo

One thing that bugs me is being attacked for something I have not done and had no intention of doing. I had intended to let this lie, but Chris Priest's entry into this argument has stung me into self-defence.

My review was *not* of David Wingrove's book, was not presented as such, and was totally unsolicited. To my astonishment, I received -- direct to my home and not via **Vector** or any other publication -- a copy of this book together with an unprecedented wodge of self-adulatory bunff from the pen of David Wingrove, accompanied by yet more from his PR firm.

I was so incensed by the contents of these items that I asked Paul Kincaid if he would accept a criticism based *solely* upon them; he quite properly replied that while he saw no objection, and felt that this might well accompany the review he had commissioned elsewhere, his acceptance would be subject to his approval of the content. I wrote the piece, he accepted it and the rest is history. If David Wingrove cannot stand having his own blurbs, and those of his PR people, criticised, perhaps he should think before sending them out.

Ken Lake
115 Markhouse Avenue, London E17 8AY

As Ken says, it's "history" and I feel that this so-called "controversy" has run for long enough in these pages. Any further comment on this subject should be marked BIN, so I know what to do with it the moment it lands on my doormat.

BP

Warrin' an' Mythin'

Jim England says, "They (animals) have no religion. They also have no wars". He has obviously discussed the first issue with a good cross-section of the animal world to come to his conclusion. Personally, I've never been able to get through to an animal to make up my mind one way or the other. On the second issue, my observations of them leads me to conclude that though they're too busy eating each other and bonking to have full scale battles, a male robin will attack other birds if they violate his terrority, as will most creatures from big cats to shrews. Since many human wars involve territorial disputes, I fail to see the distinction.

On Judith Hanna's letter. I appreciate her concern with *flippant* usage of cultural material but if Judith considers that mythologies are sacred to those who "invented"them she would have to take issue with James Joyce, TS Elliot, Umberto Eco and half the writers in history. One does not have to be a modern Greek, surely, in order to be permitted to allude to Ancient Greek mythology? A "book-knowledge" is all we have, in many cases, and the nationality of the user should have no bearing on the subject matter. That which we learn from books *is* part of a writer's own experience. One does not need to become an Aztec sacrifice in order to write honestly about the motives behind the ritual.

Garry Kilworth
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On Reviews, Again

Chris Beebee cannot believe that so many bad books are published, arguing that a reviewer who cannot categorise a book by sub-genre or cannot understand the plot ends up blaming the author for her, the reviewer's, inadequacy. Yet in the same issue of **Vector**, a number reviewers discuss, with considerable enthusiasm, books they liked and would recommend. When allowed to list books they do enjoy, the reviewers are capable of being generous, of appreciating originality, and of expressing satisfaction; and recently, I've read several books that I've enjoyed and will keep to reread. So why the bad reveiws? It's true that a great deal more good stuff is published now than ever was, but there's disproportionately more bad stuff, as each original new author acquires half a dozen pale imitators; Gibson and Quick, Niven and McCollum, Tolkien and almost anybody. Add to that film tie-ins, shared universes, RPG spin-offs and RPG-based novels, and you do actually end up with quite a lot of rubbish. I don't believe that Chris Beebee does anyone, writer, publisher or reader, a service by suggesting that we ought to sit on our opinions for the long-term good of the publishing industry.

Craig Marnock is unhappy with the personal dimension in reviews, but what is a review but one person's opinion? I agree that the reviewer should attempt to express an informed opinion, based on her knowledge of wider issues in sf, but it's impossible to remove yourself. If I were to restate Craig Marnock's objection, saying that some reviewers misuse their allotted space, then it would carry a lot of truth. There are **Vector** reviewers of the school of "I don't know what art is, but I know what I like", just as there are those who revel in Clutic obscurity. Neither approach does the buyer or author any good. However, saying that some of the reviews are poor, which they are, is a different issue from saying that the reviewers are narcissistic, or are perpetual adolescents. Criticism of a book does not normally imply criticism of the author; criticism of the standard of reviewing ought to be possible without being impolite about the reviewers.

Gareth Davies
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Cotham, Bristol, Avon BS6 5SJ

Craig Marnock seems to object to the use of the personal pronoun *per se* (though I note an appearance of one such in one of his own reviews in this mailing's PI!). Agreed -- when it heralds an exercise in self-indulgence this is to be decried. Often, however, the reviewer conveys information which *is* of the value to the reader. For instance, Tom A Jones, reviewing Bob Shaw's **The Fugitive Worlds**, lets the reader know immediately (a) he likes Shaw's work generally but (b) he

hasn't read the preceeding two volumes of the trilogy. This surely allows the reader to judge rather better the worth of Tom's review than if such information isn't forthcoming. And as another example, as one who usually doesn't care too much for fantasy, if I see a review which states "I don't usually care too much for fantasy but I really enjoyed..." I'm more likely to take notice and buy the book than if I read a favourable review from a reviewer who I know is predisposed towards the genre. In both these examples it is the personal touch in the review which I relate to.

Nor should we confuse writing which appears objective with objective writing (if such a thing exists -- isn't *everything* subjective?). Any review is the culmination of the inter-action of a reader with a writer's work. What does matter is the honesty with which the review is written, the fairness with which the reviewer approaches his or her task and the competence of the appraisal. I would hope every time to meet the first two criteria but I am all aware of my failings as regards the third. I don't know if other reviewers find themselves in the same position, but my greatest fear when writing a review is that through ignorance -- of literature, the genre or whatever it may be -- I've missed what the piece of work is all about. (This is something I've quite rightly been taken to task over with certain of my **Interzone** reviews).

The "problem" -- and I use the word advisedly -- is that most of us reviewers are amateurs. That isn't any kind of excuse (for this amateur involvement is the lifeblood and strength of the BSFA), merely a statement of fact. What I feel *I* need as an amateur reviewer is the means to improve and develop my skills and understanding of the reviewing process, which is why I was interested in Kev's new orbiter group.

Finally, in reply to a couple of Chris Beebee's points: yes, a lot of bad books are published and, no matter what critical acclaim he might receive, I couldn't give **Nova Express** a favourable review -- I hated the book!

Andy Mills
20 Luton Road, Hull

Chris Beebee points out that many **Vector** reviewers express dissapointment with their subject matter. Obviously very little material in any field will be outstandingly excellent, or outstandingly dreadful. Most sf books being published will fall somewhere between the two extremes. Also, even in a context which prides itself on being open to new ideas, most people, most of the time want more-of-the-same, another book by the author whose last book I enjoyed so much -- and publishers respond to this. I feel that many of the **Vector** reviews with a disappointed tone are not saying "this book isn't readable" or "this book isn't enjoyable", but "this book isn't excellent."

I know when I first became a reviewer for the BSFA I was sent a question-sheet asking about my reading preferences; favourite authors, categories of books reviewed by BSFA magazines that I *wouldn't* normally read for pleasure, etc. Presumably the point of this exercise was to enable the magazine editors to match titles received for review with their intended target audiences, to some extent. Perhaps if a large proportion are coming back sounding bored and frustrated, the exercise should be repeated -- perhaps the problem is that the wrong people are reviewing the books. I'd be interested to see 200 word reviews by Beebee of a random six titles from **Vector**.

Craig Marnock objects to the intrusion of the personal pronoun in reviews. My own style is to avoid statements like "this book is boring." I prefer to say "when I read this book, I found it boring", making the point that *you* may not find the book boring -- I may even come to enjoy it myself on a future occasion. This reviewer is not God, and tries hard not to pretend to an impersonal objectivity of judgement, aligned with the One True Canon of Good Taste and Literary Excellence -- for one thing, I don't think the "One True Canon" exists. A good reviewer, in my opinion, is someone who tells me enough about the book, and enough about their own taste in books, so that whether or not *they* like or hate the book, I know whether *I'm* likely to enjoy it or not. A good reviewer is consistently informative about their reasons for their judgement of a book. A good reviewer *does not* give away any element of the plot, character or background that will be less enjoyable for having had its surprise or novelty-effect undercut or devalued. A good review offers comparisons with other literature, or places a book in or near a familiar genre category, so that I have some idea of the quality of attention to bring to it. I glanced through the reviews in **V155** and found that I thought of the following as particularly good reviews: Andy Sawyer on **Truckers**, and Jim England on **The Language of the Night** (although his opinion of the book is diametrically opposed to mine, he gives me enough information for me to be quite clear about the book's appeal for me).

I don't know. Perhaps I would do better to try to review in an impersonal style. It might be interesting and informative to ask for opinions about **Vector** reviews from BSFA members at large. I feel that the purpose of reviewing is to provide a service to **Vector** readers, I'd like to know if I'm doing it usefully and well; and if not, how I could do it better. Finally, I hope Chriss Beebee and Craig Marnock are going to do some reviewing for **Vector** themselves!

Sue Thomason
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In **V155** Chris Beebee finds a tone of disappointment in reviews in **Vector** and **Paperback Inferno** and "cannot believe that so many bad books are published". I'm pleased that Chris (and Craig Marnock) has taken time to make comments about the reviews. Pressure of space has made (and will make, for the foreseeable future) it difficult to run an extensive lettercolumn in **PI**, but I welcome any comments on the reviews generally and individual reviews of particular books.

Unfortunately, it is quite true that a lot of bad -- or should I say "bad" to emphasise the subjective nature of the adjective? -- books are published. It's hardly fair to blame reviewers for "categorising" books into sub-genres when this is so obviously the practice of the publishers, guided by the natural desire of readers who have enjoyed one type of book for "more of the same". This doesn't necessarily mean that such books are awful, but it does perhaps make it harder to enjoy a book in a particular category when you have read a dozen others like it over the past month, unless you are absolutely fanatical or have no critical sense whatsoever. For me, one of the pleasures of reviewing is discovering a book which I didn't think I'd like -- which is why I made no bones enjoying **The Dragonbone Chair** (**PI81** and **V151**) quote in Deborah Beale's letter, despite the fact that it is of a genre which I now look upon with suspicion. But as a reviewer -- and a "punter" -- I have to say that there are a lot of books about which give me very little pleasure. I accept that these books may be "new" to readers who have come across such stories for the first time, in a way that they are not new to me; this is a problem that I have to deal with, and if I get it wrong I hope someone will tell me. Nevertheless, I still think that for whatever reasons, a lot of mediocre books are published; books which may not be "bad" in that they tell an adequate story in reasonably grammatical language, but which have little or nothing to distinguish themselves from many other books "In the great tradition of..."

But I think I said this before in my "Purgatory" column in **PI83**!

Fortunately, there are still a lot of books published which take one's interest. Books which are well-written, challenging, potential "classics": books which are specifically genre stories, but have that "something extra" -- a new setting, a twist to the conven-

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tional plot or character, sheer damn good storytelling -- which make them stand out: books which break new ground.

It's certainly not the case, from what I can see, that the BSFA reviews are predominantly negative, the controversy over **The Middle Kingdom** (which is better than many people seem to think it is and of which the most dismissive and in my opinion unfair review I've seen came in A Certain Other SF Newzine and not a BSFA publication) notwithstanding. If they at times seem to struggle with a tide of mediocrity, that isn't necessarily the fault of the reviewers. Where it is, let us know -- dialogue is the best form of criticism.

Andy Sawyer
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Little Neston, South Wirral L64 4BT

Being one of those reviewers Craig Marnock takes up in **V155** (I recognise on of those "I"s), I must confess that I do find the inside of my own head to be an interesting subject, or object, or environment, or condition, or something. Faced with having to comment upon or describe or make some sort of judgement on somebody else's writing, I find that I must glean all my data from that very place, and the "honest" I wish to be, the more personal I must be. To claim some sort of objectivity for my review when I know it's just my own opinion seems dishonest. Whether my reviews were, as a result of this attitude, good or bad, right or wrong, interesting or not, misleading or not, useful or not, I can't really say. I gave it a go to find out whether the inside of my head was up to it, and it was hard work. Maybe Mr Marnock and Mr Beebee should do the same; with luck the average quality of reviews will go up.

Cecil Nurse
49 Station Road, Haxby, York YO3 8LU

PS: I find the whole subject confusing, really. If one thinks about John Clute, it is his personal opinion that one wants to hear when one reads it, isn't it? One also expects him to review books that he feels strongly about one way or another, setting aside those which sparked nothing in him. Perhaps the problem with **Vector** reviewing at the moment is that the reviewers don't choose the books they are to review; I don't really know how one gets around that, though.

I think it's true that there is no one right way to review, but there are definitely wrong ways -- unexplained or unjustified assertions, for instance. There are also ways in which personal taste can be confusing -- Tom A Jones likes Bob Shaw but hasn't read The Ragged Astronauts. What does this imply?

Maybe Sue's suggestion of a reviewer's questionnaire might help? Maybe reviewers should read Damon Knight's* In Search of Wonder, *or Blish's* The Issue at Hand, *or Clute's* Strokes *for guidance?

KM

On Moorcock

I'd like to comment on Michael Moorcock's interview (**V155**). Once again he talks about **New Worlds** and the "New Wave"as if they exsisted in a social vacuum. They were actually very typical of the spirit of the 1960s, as it was expressed in a vast range of different fields. It would have been remarkable if sf had not been affected -- if it hadn't been **New Worlds** it would have been something fairly similar, probably with much the same long-term results.

Moorcock is also surprised that people saw "New Wave"as a threat. Of course it was a threat. It was a threat to the established order in sf, just as the whole spirit of the 1960s was a threat to society as it then was. And naturally it was opposed those who broadly liked things the way they were.

The result in sf was that conventional sf absorbed "New Wave", and in the process changed in small but definite ways. But it was a result of the social conflict between "New Wave"and its opponents, and also influenced by the wider social conflict, where the result was similar. I don't think it was inevitable that the local and general conflicts should have resolved themselves in the same way, but it's not surprising that they did.

Moorcock seems to exsist in a social vacuum. And he's living in the right part of London for it -- Ladbroke Grove and the surrounding areas do include communities with a definite identity, but they also include a lot of people who have no idea of who they are or what thay are doing in life. Moorcock is typical, even archetypical, apart from his knack of writing highly readable books.

Moorcock's character Cornelius is referred to as "the epitome of being the city person". Actually he's the epitome of the 60s Anglo-American bohemian type. Only a large and complex city could contain such people, but equally they couldn't exist at all if cities were not also full of completely different types of person. People like Moocock add to the richness and diversity of life, but I wish they'd occasionally notice that the rest of us also exist. And I wish Moorcock would stop pretending to have profound insights into life, when he obviously hasn't.

Madawc Williams
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John Brunner

Guest of Honour Speech, Fincon 1989

I had little knowledge of sf in Finland until I attended the Eurocon in Budapest last year [1988]. Having arrived earlier than most of the members, I was wandering around the gardens of the hotel where I was staying and out of the corner of my eye caught sight of a white T-shirt with a black design on it. The design advertised the Finnish Science Fiction Writers. You may indeed have seen me wearing something not dissimilar...

One of the most sensible impulses of my life led me to strike up a conversation with its wearer. As it turned out, this altered my entire future. Well... it does alter your future - doesn't it? - when you take your first-ever sauna?

Which is exactly what happened (and I have a certificate to prove it) as a result of my falling in with a delegation at the Budapest Eurocon. Many times, during the recent heatwave in Britain, I found myself wishing that I could leave the room in which I was sweating so voluminously, and step into a nice cool tub, maybe along with a few attractive ladies....

Of course, it was entirely for hygienic and aesthetic reasons that I found myself wishing as aforesaid. What else could a sauna possibly be for?

Except, conceivably, for cooking a whole salmon tightly wrapped in foil with a few aromatic herbs and maybe a spoonful of juniper berries. Did you know that some inventive lady in Britain, a few years ago, discovered that the most conveniently way available, to cook a whole salmon, was to put it in her dishwasher? (By itself, naturally - dirty crockery would have spoiled the fla-

vour.)

This is an example of what they call "lateral thinking".

But what I want to discuss here isn't quite the same.

Yes, there's a degree of laterality involved, in the sense that my starting-point is an alternative version of world history. This was a fundamental element in sf long before the publication of Murray Leinster's famous story **Sidewise in Time**, back in the thirties. JC Squire edited a memorable collection of stories, dating back even earlier, under the title **If it had Happened Otherwise**, whose contributors included Winston Churchill and Andre Maurois, and if you don't know it I commend it to you. But it was somewhat later that the alternative-history story became a stock ingredient of the sf mixture.

I don't mean to imply that it has now outgrown its usefullness. On the contrary, it serves a most valuable purpose in the present day. Only a few months ago I was invited by Robert Silverberg to contribute one of a group of three stories based on an old novel of his, set in world where the Black Death of the 14th century killed not about a third of the population of Western Europe but more like three-quarters. As a result, the Turks conquered the Mediterranean basin, then much of Europe, and the European conquest of the New World never took place.

I shouldn't admit the *Schadenfreude* I enjoyed when I figured out what Bob had overlooked... but I can't resist mentioning that he'd completely missed what might have happened to the Maoris if they'd been the explorers rather than the Europeans. I invented for them a meeting with the last expedition of the great Chinese explorer Admiral Cheng Ho, in the 14th century. Driven off course by hurricanes, his ragged-sailed ocean-going junks, their crewmen mad with scurvy, their powder soaked so that their guns were useless, found themselves surrounded by Maori war-canoes. As a result, in the 20th century the capital of the Land of the Long White Cloud, Rotorua, became the only industrial city running happily off ground-heat - natural steam.

I had a lot of fun cobbling that story together. Which goes to illustrate what I said about the alternative history theme still having a lot of value for writers today.

But that's not the kind of alternative world I want to discuss - what I want to discuss is how and why the dreamed-of futures of our past have gone so badly wrong.

In **Zany Afternoons** by the American cartoonist Bruce MacCall, one can see depicted what might have come to pass if the dreams of the 1930s hadn't been interrupted by war. In effect, what MacCall did was take as a starting-point images of the future as it might then have appealed to the public, at least in the United States and Europe but especially the former. A landing-field for intercontinental aircraft atop a skyscraper in Central Manhattan? Another skyscraper with a square spiral roadway running outside it all the way to the uppermost floor? If you ever wondered what such ridiculousities might look like, consult MacCall.

But, as they say, "hindsight is always 20-20" - we look at the past with perfect vision. (Some of the time... but the distortions of history introduced by those with axes to grind constitute another subject for a different speech.)

What I'm driving at is that in MacCall's world of twenty-engined trans-Atlantic planes on whose wings you can sit and dine at an elegant table, in the open (!), there are no saboteurs. No terrorists. No fanatics. Except a handful that can be brushed aside as contributing to yet another amusing story to tell one's friends back home.

I may not be quite old enough to recall that secure a world from personal experience, but I certainly read about it in my wartime childhood, when I wasn't mature enough to realise that this direction of so-called progress had been converted into a dead end. I was still susceptible to visions of the future not much different from MacCall's diesel-driven typewriter that produced colossal quantities of text, so long as the typists could keep up with its inexorable pace.

That admirable film **Brazil** exemplifies some of the implications of what I'm talking about - a future with video monitors and suchlike gadgetry underpinned by an obsolete mechanical technology - but if you want a really neat indictment of that period's view of the future, you could do worse than try the lead story in Bruce Sterling's anthology **Mirrorshades**: William Gibson's "The Gernsback Continuum". *He* knows!

At least, however, I was mature enough to realise at the press showing of **2001** what was wrong with that film. Spectacular it might be, but the future it depicted was rooted *in a past that had already been overtaken by events*.

I remember coming out of that press showing and heading, with my late wife Marjorie, for the nearest pub. We badly needed a drink. Michael Moorcock joined us, seeming overwhelmed, and said something like, "That's done it all!" In one sense, possibly (there's never been an sf picture that had more immediate impact)... but I was grieving into my beer, on the grounds that **2001** had set back what I and the best of my colleagues were trying to do in sf - set it back by 20 years!

Shortly afterwards, at a convention in the States, I made the same comment to Lester del Rey, who shook his already greying head and said, "No, John. Not twenty - thirty."

However that may be, it took a while before the record was succeeded, but it happened. Lester's late wife Judy-Lynn Benjamin wrote to me in high excitement after seeing **Star Wars**. She said, "It's like **Planet Stories** brought to life!" - or words to that effect. I dutifully went to a showing, and found out what she said was true. Hollywood, in the person of Stanley Kubrick, had at least not set sf back by worse than 20 years - *pace* Lester, at any rate. By imitating **Planet Stories** Hollywood, in the guise of what's-his-name, had set it back twice as long, four decades having elapsed since the magazine's heyday...

In consequence of this one-step-forward, two-steps-back situation, I was seriously tempted to quit sf. I did indeed devote five years to a historical novel you most probably will not have seen: **The Great Steamboat Race**. I didn't choose the title. But it was a hell of a good book.

However, it didn't make any money, so I was driven back to the sf field.

Admittedly I've been somewhat heartened by what I find. But not by any means entirely comforted.

Recently, an older cousin of mine asked me a question I couldn't answer, at least on the spur of the moment: he wanted to know whether there were any sf stories about the "greenhouse effect" written *before* it became international news.

The best I could offer was Hal Clement's **The Nitrogen Fix** - but the change in the Earth's atmosphere depicted in that novel stemmed from a rather different assumption. I was forced to fall back on non-sf items like Nigel Calder's **The Weather Machine**. Based on a TV series, it was the first book I ran across that explained the instability of the Earth's weather systems; they may flip from one state to another, like the planetary magnetic field.

One is obliged to wonder: was such a theme not treated by the sf writers of an earlier day out of sheer ignorance - they had no access to the data that implied it - or out of their awareness that such a scenario would leave half the audience dead cold, because it was so far from the stock material to which they had grown used?

The major "weather stories" I can call to mind seem to have taken a totally different tack. Arthur C Clarke's Ancient Enemy did depict an invasion of the glaciers, but back in the early fifties one was aware of the fact that ice-ages did recur apparently at random. There was that marvellous film Quintet - arguably the best sf film of all time because it was internaly self-consistent - which used the same theme. And there was JG Ballard's excellent The Drought, the nearest I suppose that anyone came to getting it right. He envisaged evaporation from the oceans being blocked by a layer of hydrocarbons, which is not quite the scenario we face now, but I certainly should have offered that to my cousin as the closest of all related "predictions". We're not in the prediction business, we sf writers - we leave that to frauds and crystal-gazers - but we do exploit the material that the real world offers, and in this specific context I think that Ballard came as close as anybody.

All of which, at last, brings me to the main thrust of my talk.

Which is that those - and I include myself - who dramatised in sf terms our path towards the future... have been defeated. None of them, none of us I have to say because I'm among them, has succeeded in creating a planet-wide vision of a future that would appeal to the mass of humanity and encourage action to bring it about, while at the same time inspiring the sense of responibility that

we need if our civilisation is to survive.None of us, to put it another way, has succeeded in creating images adequate to supplant the illogical and all too often absurd fiction enshrined in the Christian Bible, let alone the Koran - of which I remember saying when I finished reading a translation of it (purportedly a good one, by a British convert to Islam): "I could write a better holy book than that myself!"

Maybe that's what we should be doing, my colleagues and I.

In passing: when I needed a religion for a future world disrupted by an instantaneous mode of transportation (this was in **Webs of Everywhere**) I assigned the compilation of its scriptures to a Swedish prince, in memory of Guatama who was himself a prince, and their revision to a blind Egyptian poet, in memory of Islam at its best. And I called the new religion "The Way of Life", referring to one of the dicta of a certain prophet whose teaching has been thrice corrupted: once by Paul, a converted secret policeman; once by the hierarchy of what was then Earth's mightiest empire; and again in our own day by rich and cruel fundamentalists, especially in the USA.I didn't of course write the holy book. But within the novel I knew I'd entrusted the task to safe hands.

Where has our vision gone? How is it that people who dream of something better, more valid, than our quotidian round - what Wordsworth defined when he said, "Getting and spending, we lay waste our wares".... (Change that last word to "world" and you have a perceptive definition of our present predicament, don't you?)

How is it that *they* - the term may conceivably include some of those reading this - even though they may ostensibly be asking for bread, willingly make do with the stones tossed at them by people like Erich von Daniken, whose gift for deluding the public with his lies makes Josef Goebbels sound like an ill-tutored amateur?

How is it that even among the sf community one finds people who prefer comforting falsehoods to exciting facts? (Facts are exciting, far more than anything one can imagine. I stand by the dictum I gave to Chad Mulligan in **Stand On Zanzibar**: "The real world has a unique characteristic. It and only it can take us completely by surprise.")

Perhaps one must resign oneself to the idea that those entrapped in religion can't help themselves; they're victims of a psychosis whose chief symptom is the desire to infect others with their insanity - and in our tumultuous world they are not short of potential victims.

But is it not a shame that, in all the time that science fiction has been among the developed world's most popular forms of entertainment, whether in book or magazine or film or TV form, we have generated no wave of enthusiasm for any saner cult or creed than, say, the Shaver Mystery with its evil deros from lost Atlantis, or Dianetics, or the Trekkies?

I'm not saying that we should have created a new religion - I'm saying the reverse. I'm saying it's a pity that those aware of the infinite possibilities of the real universe have never overcome, not even made a fair match with, those who, from religion or ideology (which amount to the same):

- Hate or fear their fellow human beings so much that they are prepared to squander fortunes on nuclear missiles
- Despise their fellow human beings to the extent that for the sake of a petty private comfort they're content to let millions of poor people go without
- Are so lazy and greedy that, when charged with a task, they spend their pay before performing their duty and continue to do so until dragged to account
- And regard themselves as being so superior to any other part of creation that they claim the right to despoil the planet all of us inhabit, converting everything from trees to animals, down to air an water, into forms unusable by their fellow-creatures

They may look human, but they aren't. They are cancer-cells in the body of the Earth. And that explains, I suppose, why we who have long clung to such ideals as the notion that the future can be clean and beautiful and *fun* have been so betrayed. We - here I speak for my colleagues - have done our best not merely to act like court-jesters, amusing our lords and masters, but to play the sybil's role as well, uttering the occasional warning to the effect that *if this goes on...!*

And our best has not proved good enough. Which is why this may be the last time I come before a science fiction audience as an active science fiction writer.

... 2001 had set back what I and the best of my colleagues were trying to do in sf - set it back by 20 years!

Are you to understand by the foregoing that I am about to retire from writing? Bury my head in the sand as an ostrich is reputed to do, pull in my paws and hibernate like a tortoise?

Not exactly. I'm partway through a novel, and it's a far-future fantasy, and I have commissions from other sources that will lead to other material recognisable as sf. Besides, I have ideas for lots of short sf stories that I hope to plug into my schedule now and then when I find the time. I have to earn a living.

No: what I mean can be illustrated this way.

When I first went abroad - I was 17 - it was in the now-forgotten era when British tourists were warned against drinking foreign water except out of a bottle with a label on it. Now, it's the overseas visitors who are warned about the water in my country, and indeed the government is faced with legal action because of its risk to health. Besides, a few years ago a quarter-million people in Liverpool were deprived of water in their homes; a year or two back thousands of people in the South-West of England, some disatnce - thankfully! - from my home, were poisoned by a tanker-load of chemicals poured into their supply; and the day before I drafted this speech more than *half* a million people in London itself had their water cut off, partly because of a drought, partly because of a break-down at a pumping station, and partly because of mosquito larvae breeding so fast in the public supply that they rendered it unfit to drink....

Friends, forget all the wonderful visions of the future that we sf writers used to invent. We've wound up face to face with the reality, in which even the government of a so-called developed country like mine is incapable is incapable of ensuring that clean wholesome water is delivered to people's homes. I don't know whether you've seen the posters put out by foreign-aid organisations saying things like:

It would cost a lot of money to provide everybody with clean water - about as much per year as the world spends on armaments every two weeks!

But my country can't do it any more. I mean: provide clean drinking water. And Britain's supposed to be rich! It follows that the whole damned planet must be filthy from the mess we've made!Confronted with this kind of crisis, how can I go on?

No, I don't believe any longer in "our glorious destiny among the stars"! Those whom I earlier described as the cancer-cells in the body of **Gaea** have won. I'm prepared for our civilisation to go the way of Rome and Jericho and Ur and Mohenjo-Daro. If I write any more far-future fantasies I shall call them just that: fantasies.

But I can't forgive the bastards who have stolen our beautiful dreams!

John Brunner

Magazine Reviews

New Pathways #16

Established in 1986, **New Pathways** was originally a bimonthly magazine of oddball, off-the-wall, and generally non-traditional sf and fantasy. Despite some setbacks in 1987 which saw the magazine become a quarterly, it continued to prosper and grow, gaining the support of many new and established writers and artists. Recent editions (issues #11 to #15) have included fiction by Paul Di Filippo, Don Webb, John Shirley, Lewis Shiner, Ardath Mayhar, Steve Rasnic Tem, Brian Aldiss and Bruce Boston. Art and comic strips by Ferret, Mink Mole and Richard Kadrey, regular music reviews by Matt Howarth, and the occasional strip by Michael G Adkisson (**NP**'s publisher/editor); plus regular features from Paul Di Filippo, book reviews from Don and Rosemary Webb, and more recently a column on the British sf scene by Les Escott, the man behind Morrigan Publications.

With issue #16 (June 1990), despite a lapse of some eight months since issue #15, **NP** has returned to its original bimonthly schedule, complete with full-colour glossy cover and the dropping of its subtitle -- "Into Science Fiction and Fantasy". But very little has really changed: **NP** continues to published experimental and frequently strange fiction which more sane (and much less daring) publications wouldn't touch with a barge-pole. Don Webb contributes "The Martian Spring of Dr Woodard", revealing and revelling in the strangeness that lies beneath the mundane surface of our everyday lives. Brian Aldiss' "Fur Trade" is a short short about genetic engineering and farming, the dry wit contrasting sharply with some of his previous stories in the magazine. "Language" by Lewis Shiner is a short mainstream piece, beautifully illustrated by Gregorio Montejo, and shows the complexities of meaning behind more than just the spoken or written word.

MGA's editorial, an introduction to the new-look new-policy 1990s **NP**, gradually degenerates into a rant against the walls of the "sf ghetto" and its fannish inhabitants. I agree with much of his argument, but I do find it difficult to believe, for instance, that *all* convention-goers are "egocentric and isolated people" or "abnormal individuals... sorely in need of psychiatric help", because this is certainly the impression that he puts across. He makes all the usual polemicist's mistakes by over-generalising -- I mean, not all Americans are tourists in Hawaiian shirts, and neither are all Russians communists. Not so with Richard Grant's "Briefing for an Assault on the Citadel": this voices much the same ideas though in a more level-headed manner, picking faults with writers and critics and editors, and indicating ways of making the "ghetto" a more worthy place to be. This is great stuff, thought-provoking, and makes me feel that maybe there is some hope after-all.

The other major non-fiction piece is "The Turkey City Lexicon". Subtitled "A Primer for SF Workshops", this was compiled and edited by Shiner and is geared directly at hopeful writers, showing you how and how *not* to do it. This is often very funny in places, and embarrassing in others when you realise that you have been guilty of "Calling a Rabbit a Smeerp" or "Funny Hat Characterisation" or having a "Squid in the Mouth", not to mention plenty of "Fuzz". If nothing else, an important writer's tool.

New Pathways is an amalgam of oddities, fiction and art, comic strip, reviews and articles, and above all else proof that a magazine *can* become popular without having to "sell out" to the lowest common denominator.

Boyd Parkinson

Dream #23
Auguries #12
The Edge #2

Dream #23 carries on with the same cover design it's had for at least the last year. The magazine has a slightly dated look and feel, perhaps due to the close-together lines and the typeface. Lyle Hopwood's lead story "Feminine Intuition" is a straightforward bit of cyberpunk, nothing like as good as "The Outside Door" (**Interzone** #28). Brian Rolls' "The Dinosaur" is good ol' pre-NewWave Ray Bradbury stuff with a bit of heuristic programming to bring it up to date. Sydney J Bounds' "Murder by Magic" is entertaining. GM Williams' "The Moral Consideration" is a remarkable debut. Sam Jeffers' review of other magazines is always of interest, but George Townsend's editorial wasn't up to scratch this time. Predictions? Who needs them?

People beef about the production quality of these small press magazines but I can't fault **Dream** #23. Nor **Auguries**: issue 12 is a well-presented little thing and nicely illustrated. I like the fiction here better than that in **Dream** #23. "Eggs" by Arabella Wood is strange and memorable. Same goes for Graham Andrews' "A Presence in the Spring", a tale of psychiatry and murder. Hilary Robinson's "The Sentient Cloak" went OK until at the crucial moment it reminded me of a certain comic strip which I shan't name. Sydney J Bounds' private mage makes an appearance here as well in "Find the Mage". The illustrations, mostly by editor Nik Morton, are varied and detailed. The shorter fiction is less satisfactory, as it sometimes is; I feel editors put things in as filler, quite often. Dave Parsons' "Oasis" didn't do a lot for me, nor did "April Showers and Green-eyed Girls" which is back to the old depressing Morrissey-lyric standard as in **The Gate** #1.

Which brings me (I guess) to **The Edge** #2. Editor Graham Evans says he is after imaginative non-genre material, but a lot of the work in issue #2 is still genre. Steven Baxter weighs in with another Xeelee story; Mike Chinn's "Once Upon Beltane" is an interesting parallel-world piece. "Terminator Zero and the Dream Demons" by Andy Darlington is strange. Kind of cyberpunk rewrite of "The Maltese Falcon" complete with obligatory Oriental female lead, and supposedly momentous repeated images (alien/demon parasite) that don't quite fire up at the end. And a dead parrot and a namecheck for **The Gate**. The rest of the fiction starts at this level of oddness and goes way past: plenty of imagination anyhow. There are articles on "Lord Horror", Sax Rohmer, and Philip K Dick, all of which are worth reading. Patrick Whittaker sets out a manifesto for what he calls "White Heat SF" -- like it, Patrick. But the "Bluffers Guide To the No Wave": say what?

Issue #2 isn't typeset -- the smart cover is at odds with the interior look. Issue #3 will improve on this. **The Edge** is an ambitious magazine and I hope its ambitions are fulfilled.

Christopher Amies

Australian Science Fiction Review

Social Inventions

Here's a quote from an article in **Australian Science Fiction Review** #23:

> Without memory there can be no imagination, for fiction and fantasy are reworkings of every kind of experience, research or dreams. To lose one's memory is to lose not only contact with the past but with the prospect of an altered future. Novels contribute to this reshaping by depicting a greater range of possibilities than any of us could comprehend through personal experience, thereby reminding us that our daily routines are not the only way to live.

This is a powerful statement, connecting history, our understanding of our present world, and our ability to think about or imagine futures and alternatives into a single dynamic. Though we may fondly imagine that it applies to sf and sf readers, this clearly isn't necessarily so. That is, writing that does not "remind us that our daily routines are not the only way to live", which leaves us happily (or helplessly) thinking that there is no alternative, that the sf that we read and write should and must always be what it has always been, has failed. As a critical stance it is surely the most challenging one can take, since it demands not only that the work one reads have an effect upon one's thinking, that it broaden one's mind, but that the critic's mind be open to being broadened.

The interesting thing about the article from which this is taken ("Memory and Imagination" by Humphrey McQueen) is that it was reprinted from a magazine called **Social Alternatives**, which one presumes is not about sf at all but about thinking creatively about the present. That the editorial collective of **ASFR** felt it worth reprinting in their own pages says much about their own approach to the criticism of sf. Russel Blackford's review of his year's reading, discussing his fantasy, sf, mainstream, and non-fiction reading in the same breath, as it were, is another good indicator. The contributions are opiniated and not a little bit scrappy, and the result is that **ASFR** is lively and lacking even a whiff of institutional rigor mortis. You can tell it's just a bunch of people who think about sf sharing their thoughts with each other, none of this "objectivity" crap.

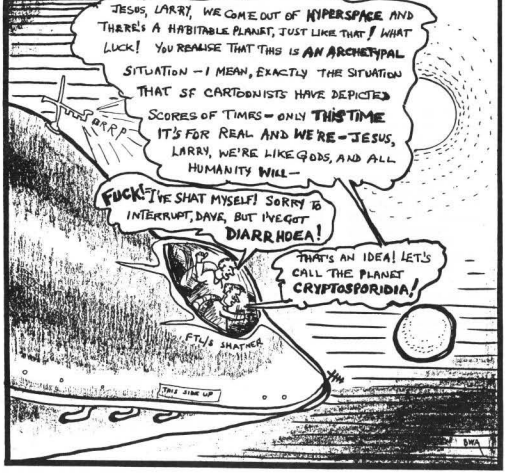
Thinking creatively about the present is the precis for **Social Inventions**, the Journal of the Institute for Social Inventions. It is not literature nor is it "futurology". It is not about trying to guess or describe where the world is going, nor about telling people how things should be. It is concerned with working out the details, being as practical and realsitic as possible. Much of this can obviously also be said of certain types of sf. It differs from sf in two fundamental ways: it deals with those "soft" matters that often get left out of sf visions, such as taxation, energy, transport, education, health, welfare, and housing policies, law, and the economics of things; and it starts from now. Half of the "inventions" that it discusses are already being tried somewhere. Far from being dull, it is incredibly inspiring. It makes you think "heyl things don't actually have to be this way!" and "so art, sf, and public relations *aren't* the only ways to be creative!" This happens not because the ideas are necessarily earth-shaking, but because nothing is sacred. Anything and everything could be done differently, because everything used to be and is done differently in different places. One heck of a good cure for those sf blues that descend when wild and wonderful ideas cease to impress.

Cecil Nurse

SF Eye #6
Journal Wired #1
Nova Express

SF Eye has taken it's time to reach issue #6, but it looks as though its problems are sorted. Right from issue #1, however, the content has been of a very high standard -- serious, critical, enlightening and well-argued without ever having that dusty academic tone which makes much critical writing unapproachable. Regular contributors have been Bruce Sterling, Richard Kadrey, Charles Platt; but the best of them all is Paul Di Filippo who in previous issues has looked at Thomas Pynchon's imitators and the short fiction of John Crowley, and in the current issue offers a fascinating view of Iain McEwan which sent me back to re-read his stories with delight.

The reviewers (recent issues have included Liz Hand, John Shirley and Gregory Benford, among many others) are unafraid to speak their mind, and have the knowledge to justify it. But for me, the reason I buy every issue is



Cartoon by Brian Aldiss from *New Pathways* #15

the interviews. Past issues have seen in-depth interviews with Shepard, Delany, Barker and conversations between Shiner and Waldrop, Ellen Datlow and Ed Bryant, whilst issue #6 contains the best by far of all the many interviews I've seen with Iain Banks.

There's also a Banks' interview (by David S Garnett) in the first issue of **Journal Wired** -- but in contrast to the one in **SF Eye**, this is the thing which lets the new magazine down. Garnett seems more concerned with Banks' notorious car crash, hotel climbing and assorted breweries than anything in Banks' books. Such things may be fascinating in a con speech or a fanzine, but a critical journal aspires to higher things, as Cobley demonstrates in his interview with Banks in **SF Eye** #6.

Highlights in **JW** are John Shirley on the perils of Hollywood screenwriting and a passionate and sustained rant by Lucius Shepard about the "cutting edge", why neither cyberpunk nor splatterpunk actually made it, and the need for a little anger occasionally.

JW also runs fiction, with a possibly pornographic extract from Rudy Rucker's forthcoming "transrealist autobiographic fiction" novel, and an intriguing story of love, madness and the dark secrets of Atlantis by AA Attanasio. Finally, **JW** has an interview with 60s revolutionary Abbie Hoffman which, while interesting, lacks direct relevance to 1990s sf.

Nova Express is also notable for its interviews: the issues I've seen have featured **KW** Jeter, James P Blaylock, and Kim Stanley Robinson, each accompanied by extensive bibliographies. There are also interesting reviews, a long and witty review on the New Orleans Worldcon that drops more names than I ever could (!), and features on Harlan Ellison and Joe R Lansdale (actually, the latter is an extract from **The Drive-In 2** -- BP). Really, my only gripe with **NE** is its brevity (just 28pp as opposed to **JW**'s 128 or **SF Eye**'s 72).

These aren't the only good magazines around, but they are representative of the quality of entertaining, challenging and vibrant non-fiction magazines in the modern genre. Style-wise, **SF Eye** is way ahead, with a clear layout and wide-ranging illustrations, and is the only one I would recommend to *any* serious follower of modern sf. For the others, check the contents first, but at least do check them out!

Kev McVeigh

Magazines and chapbooks, etc, for review should be sent to **Vector**, Magazine Reviews, 11 Marsh Street, Barrow-in-Furness, Cumbria LA14 2AE

Of Science and Fiction

Paul J McAuley is that rarity, a British science fiction writer who is also a practising scientist. His first stories appeared in **Interzone** and **Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine**, and since then his work has enjoyed similar success on both sides of the Atlantic. His first novel, **Four Hundred Billion Stars**, was published by Gollancz in 1988 and is due out in paperback now. It made him the first British winner of the Philip K Dick Memorial Award in 1989. His second novel, **Secret Harmonies**, was published by Gollancz in November 1989.

Both your novels are set in the same universe, as are many of the stories. Is it because you find that universe has so much you want to tell, or do you feel it'll be successful because people recognise where it is?

I think probably the first reason. It's not a deliberate marketing ploy, and it's not going to be share-cropped or anything like that. Also, perhaps, it's laziness -- I can't be bothered to think of a brand new wonderful exciting background each time. Though the novel I'm writing at the moment will probably close out the sequence.

I did work out a history of it, the way the fashion changed and the way the music changed. I just wanted a framework wherein I could write stories which weren't necessarily about changing points in history, but which were in that framework so I had it always in the background.

It's unusual in a hard science fiction story for so much awareness of the social attitudes and set up. Was that deliberate?

Yes. I never thought that a hard sf story should simply be about people in overalls. Of course, that's less of a distraction from the main evangelical thrust of the message. Which, I think, is a problem with a lot of the hard sf I read, that there's this burning-eyed, evangelical idea that you have to get this message across, that the universe is there for mankind's taking. That's one message, there are others as well.

Whereas I just like to tip stuff in when I'm writing. I don't have a very linear mind, which is a terrible thing to say as a scientist, and when I'm writing stuff just attracts me. I

read all the magazines, like **The Face** and **I-d**, and steal all the fashions from them. I mutate them slightly, but the idea that the future's going to be a poor environment and everyone's going to be going around dressed the same is really absolute nonsense. Whether it's the next 20 years or the next 800 years I still think it's going to be true.

It's a very identifiable milieu. I was reading the description of the university in *Secret Harmonies* and thinking: that sounds like California. You were at California, weren't you?

Actually it's more like Aston. I just wanted to write a campus novel. Every English writer is supposed to have a campus novel in them, so I got my campus novel out of my system. It could be Aston or it could be any of the new universities which were built in the 60s. They were built around the campus idea, which is the American idea, so it could be -- not UCLA, which is where I was, but Riverside, let's say.

Do you write hard sf because you're a scientist?

Do you write ghost stories because you're a ghost? I don't think so. I was interested in hard sf before I became a scientist, but whether I had that mind-set anyway it's difficult to say.

The novel after the one I'm writing isn't going to be hard sf, though it is going to be a lot about science and the history of the philosophy of science. But I guess I probably wouldn't write an out-and-out fantasy, for instance.

How much do you find that your scientific background and training come into what you write?

It helps being able to read journals like **Nature**, so you can keep two weeks ahead of **New Scientist**. It helps in some ways and hinders in others. It helps you not make mistakes like having a planet with an oxygen atmosphere but no life. On the other hand you can get too fanatical about details and you can just get lost.

I was interested that in *400 Billion Stars* the planet is teeming with life. I've got used to hard sf stories where an expedition team arrives on a planet and there's an alien there but no other form of life is mentioned.

Precisely. That's partly being a biologist: you know that you've got to have a properly constructed ecological system. So you must have producers, that's plants; consumers, which are animals which eat plants; and animals which eat other animals; and things which feed on dead bodies and turn everything back into the cycle again. So in that sense it definitely is a help to be a biologist because you can actually construct that. On the other hand you've got to watch out you don't become a bit too conservative. You can't turn out those wonderfully wacky alien life-forms which Phil Dick turned out, so that, maybe, is a problem in being a biologist writing sf: you're constraining yourself.

Your central characters tend not to be too sympathetic. Dorthy is very much a loner, very difficult to handle. That's unusual in a lead character.

In the novel, simply, she *was* isolated, and because of her isolation she was able to see through to the underlying truth, which the others couldn't working as a team. They were getting fixated on details; which is the way that science works now in teams, everyone has their own little area so they never see the whole picture. But she just went straight to the heart.

Were you trying to make a comment on how science works?

That was part of it. There is also a comment on that in **Secret Harmonies** in the way funding works. Though that was only a slight in-joke, of the guy waiting to see if his research is being funded and they're cutting back on it. That's the situation in British universities today.

Do you think sf should be about science?

It should certainly have an attitude that reflects an awareness of what science is and how it affects society.

coming stoutly to the defence of British sf, the literary tradition. Do you feel that tradition is important?

I feel, actually, it's a problem, in that British sf writers want to be recognised in the wide literary world as writers. In one way I agree with that: why should our books be categorised with the lowest common denominator? This is, of course, always the problem with genre. On the other hand, crime writers don't have this problem, they're taken seriously and we're not.

One of the problems is that most people in Britain don't know beans about science, and it's actually cool not to know anything about science.

The two cultures?

Yeah, the two cultures. People are ignorant about science. It's changing now, in the States. It's an interesting symptom that the Stephen Hawking book is still hanging in there in the best sellers. I don't know if people have read it or not, but it's an indica-

"...most mainstream writers are far far better writers than sf writers, it's just that they're not writing about anything. They write perfectly about nothing at all."

A lot of British sf tends to have very little to do with science. I wondered if you felt out of step with what's happening in this country?

One of the problems is that our gene pool is so small there isn't really a consensus, there isn't really the chance of having a "Movement" as you had in the States based around the Austin writers, for instance. Even when **New Worlds** was going, at least half the writers were American. So in that sense we're all individuals, all doing our own thing.

I think that's one of the problems the Americans have with us, because it's very difficult to pigeonhole you. They do like to be able to categorise people so they can market it -- it makes it a lot easier for the reps to market it to the bookshops, which is the bottom line in publishing. I think that's one of the problems of being a British writer: we're all a bunch of individuals and the American publishing system, wonderful though it is in some respects, finds it very hard to handle.

Does writing hard sf make it easier for you?

Oh yes, definitely. They can always stick a cute alien on the cover and there you go -- and it's actually relevant to the book.

I've just read your letter in *SF Eye* #5 slagging off (Gregory) Benford and

tion that, hey, maybe science is relevant and it's hip after all.

The other problem I have with the British literary scene -- and this is something that's coming out recently, and they're realising it as well -- is that it is so dated and not relevant to the real world. It is relevant to Hampstead dinner parties, to people who've been to Oxford or Cambridge. And it is about stasis, it is not about change. I think that people are now beginning to realise in this country that the future is out there, the future is a real country. A country without maps, but we know the territory exists and we know the rough shape of the territory. Science fiction is a window into how those territories might exist.

We're providing rough maps, even if they're only marked: Here Be Dragons?

Yeah, we're providing the "Rough Guide" to the various areas. I wouldn't like to say that we're producing warnings, we're just saying it is changing. This is the constant thing about sf, it is about change. This is one of the differences with fantasy, because fantasy is always about saving the kingdom, so fantasy is about stasis in the end. Well, good fantasy does have some measure of change. Even in **Lord of the Rings**, having saved the kingdom they still doom the old system, which is

fair enough, which is good. But bad fantasy is always: the kingdom is saved and things go on as before.

But the central tenet of sf, that there is change, is one that is missing from the English literati. That's why they're so badly out of date, and that's why Iris Murdoch novels trying to write about street people are such a joke, because she doesn't know beans about it. It's like judges who have to be told what a gas bill is. This is what Benford was accusing the British sf scene of, of not being relevant to the real world. And I just don't think that's true.

Do you ever feel the temptation to write mainstream rather than sf?

Gee, become respectable? It's never worked out like that. "King of the Hill" was supposed to be a mainstream story, and I still think it is a mainstream story. I did send it out to one or two mainstream anthologies that were around then, but they didn't want to handle it. Maybe it wasn't up to their level of writing. Don't get me wrong, most mainstream writers are far far better writers than sf writers, it's just they're not writing about anything. They write perfectly about nothing at all. So, the impulse is there, but it never quite works out properly. It's getting back to why do you write sf.

Is it because sf has to have more of a story?

I have this problem with the idea that sf has to have a plot structure, or in the end you must satisfy the readers' expectations. **Secret Harmonies** twists that slightly. Maybe that comes down to my characters not being pleasant. I don't think all my characters are unpleasant. They're just screwed up, basically. What's wrong with having screwed up characters? Poor old Dorthy in **Eternal Light**, which is the one I'm working on at the moment -- it's not really a sequel, it's like a mega-expansion of the ideas in **400 Billion Stars** -- has an even worse time in some ways. She's been virtually in prison for 10 years and she's suddenly sprung, but she's a much nicer person, she's a lot calmer than she was before, and in the end she's settled down with her kid. All my characters are pensioned off.

How do you go about structuring a novel? Do you get the whole thing worked out and then sit down and write it, or do you let things develop as you write?

Not in a novel. In a short story you have to more or less know how everything's going to come out, though you can always surprise yourself somewhat. But short stories have to be really intense and they're over so quickly that there's no room for wandering off on a sidetrack somewhere. If you wander off on a sidetrack it's no longer a short story.

With a novel stuff can appear. The way I usually start out: I've got a vague idea of the shape of the novel, but it would be difficult to draw it on a piece of paper. I know vaguely where it goes and what happens in it, and I know the end. Knowing the end is important. And I've usually got a little epiphany, a little vision. In **Secret Harmonies** it was Richard Florey standing up there on a radio telescope surrounded by red grass baking under an orange sun in a black sky. What's that guy doing there? So that was the little vision from that. Then things come along and they can surprise me.

Writing a novel is a long term process for me, it takes at least a year. The one I'm writing at the moment has taken two years. And things are happening all the time that I can put in, because it's partly about cosmology and processes at the centre of the galaxy. Cosmology is a really hot science at the moment, there's tons of new stuff coming out. This is one reason why the Hawking book precipitated out, because it's trying to crystalise and say this is where we are and this is what we should work to. I'm seeing stuff in **Nature** all the time about things like runaway stars, so I stick that in. Recently someone came up with the idea that time travel is possible now, but only if the universe is closed, in other words if there's enough mass in the universe to make sure that it goes into

reverse and there's a big crunch, and it's not a flat universe that continues expanding forever and gets colder and colder. Time travel has always been possible in quantum physics, but now they reckon you can actually do it, go into the future. Theoretically, anyway. So it's interesting seeing all this stuff coming out.But the other thing with novels is how your characters can suddenly take you by surprise. In **Eternal Light** I've got one character who was intended to be a real minor character. He was intended to help someone else who's as dumb as a box of rocks. It's great having a dumb character in a novel, and he was there just to help her out of a situation, and he took over and went along with her. And I got more and more interested in him as he went along. He's kind of a Situationist, if you know that movement in the early part of this century, angry young men revolting against the idea of art being bourgeois. They were doing stuff like interrupting mass at Notre Dame and they nearly got lynched, they had to be saved by the police, because they got up saying the Church is dead, Christ is dead, God is dead, in a very authentic sermon. They were like spanner throwers. And I was reading the Griel Marcus book, **Lipstick Traces**, how the punk movement arose. That came along after the character came along, so I started working that in as well. Because I already knew that the guy was into doing pranks, he does work like "Urban Terrorism" which unleashes a whole bunch of machines which capture people and spray fake blood over them, introducing predator-prey relationships into the urban environment. He gets into trouble because one of his machines is like a scientology machine which captures people and rants at them to try and convert them to a weird religion -- it captured an ambassador and they weren't too pleased about that. So he went from being sponsored artist to underground artist hiding out in this sybaritic domed holiday resort for rich people on Titan. He just kind of grew, I got more interested in him and he's still there at the novel's end. He survived all the way through.

So it's interesting that you can have the idea of the shape of the novel, like you can have an idea of the shape of the territory, but you can come to the bend and something surprises you. But if you ask me where this guy comes from, I don't know.

What's coming up?

There's the novel I'm working on now which is going to take another year. That's a long novel called **Eternal Light**, and that's going to close out everything.'It's going to predict where human consciousness is going to go, and it's also about the secret history that was happening under some of the stuff in **400 Billion Stars**. Then I'm beginning to think about the one that comes after that, which I think is going to be set in the Renaissance. What happens if, instead of an artistic revolution, they have a scientific revolution? So Leonardo da Vinci really did get to build his combat aircraft. He turns into maybe Howard Hughes, and gets obsessed with tunnels to the centre of the Earth. But it's also about all these people wandering round Europe trying to convince people that the millenium is at hand. Actually trying to get funding for it. They'd go to courts and try to get funding for the end of the world project.

You talk very humorously about the ideas, do you consider the books in some way comedies?

I'm always terribly conscious that I can't actually sit down and write a straight knock-out funny story like the way, say, Kim Newman or Howard Waldrop can. I'd like to do it but I just can't. There's certainly an underlying sense of black humour, I think, the way the world rears up and knocks you on the nose sort of stuff. A sense of the absurd as well. Like in **Secret Harmonies** there are a lot of coincidences. Everything happens to people at least twice, and they keep meeting people who other people have met, so all the combinations are going on, but they meet in absurd situations. There's always the sense that history is tragedy, and in the next repeat it's farce. It's more cynical, I suppose, than anything else.

The one thing I don't want to do is put all these in-jokes in, which is one of the problems when you're writing, say, alternate history. But it's difficult to inject a sense of humour when you're talking about the death of the universe. Unless you're Woody Allen. ■

Book Reviews

Starfield

Duncan Lunan (Ed)
Orkney Press, 1990, 211pp, 10.95

The people of Scotland have always had an independent turn of mind. It has surfaced in this, the first-ever anthology of Scottish sf. The stories come from a sprinkling of leading Scottish writers (Chris Boyce, Alisdair Gray), and the winners and runners-up from the annual **Glasgow Herald** sf short story competition. There are also several poems from Edwin Morgan and one from alburt plethora.

Collections are a mixed bag. This one is on the downbeat side (does anyone out there have hope for the future?), but it includes several lighter pieces:

> Deprived of her ducks, McMenamy's Granny was compelled to knit faster than ever. She sat in her rocking-chair, knitting and rocking and rocking and knitting and McMenamy sat opposite, brooding on what he could do to help.

Alisdair Gray
"THE CRANK that MADE the REVOLUTION"

And, of course, it has several Glasgow-specific stories:

> So ah gets him ti tell me aboot his ain spaceship, still havin a good laugh, like, ye know; an he starts comin oot wi aw this crap aboot environmental harmonisation or somethin. Ah mean, ah didny know whit song he wis singin, but he definitely knew aw the words.
>
> "Aye," he says, "ah keep it jist along the road. Ye know Glasgow Cross?"
>
> "Oh aye," ah says. "Ye mean the polis box?" thinkin that maybe he's been watchin Doctor Who.

David Crooks, "Spaced Out"

Mind you, a working knowledge of the Scots language isn't needed to read and enjoy this anthology, although it would probably help if you knew something about the places mentioned.

The rest of the stories range from fantasy in Elsie WK Donald's "Dragonsniffer" through alein invasions in Chris Boyce's "The Rig" to out-and-out hard science in Edwin Morgan's poems, "The Moons of Jupiter".

This is a good collection with stories which should appeal to most tastes. It is a worthy addition to the body of Scottish literature.

Jon Wallace

Verbivore

Christine Brooke-Rose
Carcanet, 1990, 196pp, 12.95

This would be the answer to a writer's prayer: suddenly the electronic media cut out. Intermittently, the human voice can no longer be transmitted. Radio and television: gone. Aircraft crash because their pilots lose

touch with the ground. In **Verbivore** it's due to the computer/stones that made their appearance in **Xorandor** (1986), when they fed on radiation and were only narrowly dissuaded from blowing up nuclear weapons so as to ingest the Csium-17 at their cores.

This is a book about language. Dialogue continues without speech marks; the narrative viewpoint shifts from character to character. Dr Brooke-Rose brings back the computer-allusive slang from **Xorandor**. And in the techno-paradise of early-21st-century United Europe, the characters use every language to hand: German, French, Italian, pop up here and there, just as they will in our future. This is an intensely cosmopolitan world whose borders seem simply to have ceased to exist.

Xorandor was about the nuclear arms race. This now being a sidelined issue, **Verbivore** is about the environment. The cuts in communication are an attempt by the global computer network to slow down the rate of planetary destruction, by simply making it impossible for people to organise themselves on a large enough scale. From global village the world must move into a village mentality, small-town scope and scale, if it is to survive at all.

Naturally the writers and poets and dramatists love this, as do those who can't stand quiz shows or soap operas. People have to start screen-typing or even writing by hand. The politicians are not so happy and naturally enough complain loudly and do nothing.

Verbivore is about the fragmentation of language and by extension the fragmentation of consciousness, which has replaced real communication with continual white noise; a background radiation of sound. The all-pervading environmental noise of modern society is represented by a character called Decibel, who "measures" noise. At the end she obligingly dies. Because at the end of the book, just when the world thinks that the Verbivore phenomenon is over, it all

Christopher Amies

The Monstrous Regiment

Storm Constantine
Orbit, 1990, 344pp, £5.95

Storm Constantine is best known for her **Wraeththu** trilogy. This is a new departure for her. One of the book's aims, according to its dedication, was to change her father's misogynistic view of female writers.

This is the story of the planet Artemis, several years after its settlement by feminists and their male supporters. It is also a story of extremes, of what happens when the balance between men and women swings too far one way in order to stop in swinging too far the other.

Corinna Trotgarden is the daughter of a marsh family, brought up to believe that men are at least human beings and worthy of good treatment, if not her absolute equal. Until she goes to the big city of Silven Crescent as angeldt. On Artemis the women are divided into two sorts: the angeldt are the feminine side, and the flamists, such as Corinna's warlike lover General Carmenya Oralien, the masculine. The attitudes in the city are far more extreme than those in the marsh and prove a culture shock to Corinna.

Coincidentally the arch rebel male Elvon L'Belder escapes, meets Corinna and her family and has a profound effect on their lives and opinions. Add to this a search for the previous denizens of Artemis, the incomprehensibly alien Greylids, and you have all the ingredients of a huge novel.

The book is extremely well written, though the author's tendency to elliptical prose slows the action down, and the number of characters that are developed in depth detracts from the main plotline.

Artemis is splendid in all its aspects: the flora and fauna, the seasons, the different environments of the city and the marsh. Constantine has a real flair for atmosphere. The characterization of the leading players is very strong, though there are exaggerations. The Dominatrix is a case in point; my credibility was strained by this sadistic woman.

The verdict? A slow-paced but convincing and gripping book. Once you have overcome the lengthy introductions to the characters and the scene-setting, there is action aplenty. It should also leave you feeling that there is no alternative to equality between the sexes -- no bad message for an SF book these days; perhaps it has also changed the author's father's views for the better!

Barbara Davies

Demons and Dreams

The Best Fantasy and Horror 2
Ellen Datlow and Terri Windling (Eds)
Legend, 1990, 579pp, £13.95

Fantasy and Horror do not enjoy a good press right now. The one is seen as a refuge for those already sated with Mills and Boon, the other as the preserve of adolescent boys with visceral preoccupations. It takes a collection like Datlow and Windling's **Best Fantasy and Horror 2** to remind us that there is more to these related genres than a quick perusal of the shelves in any large general bookstore might imply. Indeed, having read this collection, I am increasingly uncomfortable with the distinction drawn between the genres. Apart from occasional stories, like Joe R Lansdale's "Night They Missed The Horror Show", and the knowledge that some authors, such as Dennis Etchison or Patricia C Wrede, work almost exclusively within one or the other genre, I found it difficult and indeed undesirable to put any of these stories in one or another category. Datlow and Windling have cast their nets commendably wide, and their working definitions seem sufficiently broad and elastic to include authors one might not, at first sight, have expected to see in such a volume. It's a welcome indication that there are authors prepared to eschew the conventional trappings of dragons and intestines in exploring the boundaries of the more nebulous genre of "fantastic literature", as well as editors prepared to recognise the phenomenon.

Among forty-six stories, it is impossible to choose favourites, if not invidious given the high standard of the selections. One minor weakness is that Datlow and Windling, whilst providing a brief commentary on each story, do not include a biography of each author. Thus one has no indication of previous publishing histories, or of whether one is witnessing the first flowering of a new career. The other is their decision to include an unnecessary three stories from Gene Wolfe. "The Rose and the Nightingale" is already much-anthologized, whilst "Game in the Pope's Head" is a poor example of his work. However, this is more than compensated for by the impressively detailed summations of the year in Fantasy and Horror publishing, not to mention Edward Bryant's survey of Fantasy and Horror films, a detailed compilation of relevant obituaries, and four pages of honourable mentions. This is more than simply a collection of fantastic stories; it's a valuable bibliographic tool which should take its place on the shelves of anyone who claims more than a passing interest in fantastic writing.

Maureen Porter

The Days of Perky Pat

Philip K Dick
Gollancz, 1990, 380pp, £14.95

This is the fourth volume of the Collected Stories of Philip K Dick, containing 18 short stories written between 1954 and 1963. This is a much longer period than previous volumes have covered, and indicates of course that Dick had now begun to write novels and that these were filling his time. (Paul Williams' bibliography suggests that Dick wrote 18 novels in that ten year period).

What is significant is that the stories maintain the same high standard of Dick's previous fiction, and show how his mind was moving. For instance, at least two stories provide the basis of later novels: "The Mold of Yancy" includes the main figures of **The Penultimate Truth**, and the title story deals with the dolls later met in **The Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch**, though Chew-Z and Can-D have no significance in this story. Dick's stories remain very much more traditional than his novels: the drugs, mind-expansion and counter-culture implicit in **Palmer Eldritch** are absent from the story. "The Days of Perky Pat" is set totally on Earth, and the dolls are presented clearly as a delusion which prevent the survivors of nuclear war from rebuilding society.

Perhaps the most interesting story in this collection is "Waterspider". A group of scientists from the far future decide that the SF writers of the 1950s were actually precognitives who knew all the scientific problems the scientists would encounter and their solutions, so they steal Poul Anderson from a SF conference to come and help them. Only too late do they discover that Anderson's science is a level lower than mine.

The final story in the collection, "Oh, To Be A Blobel!", is one of Dick's rare pieces of comedy, a play on the idea of opposites

eventually meeting.

This is a book well worth having.

LJ Hurst

Aura

Carlos Fuentes

Deutsch, 1990, 88pp, £9.95, £5.95 pb

You close the book feeling disturbed and thrilled. This is an elegant supernatural novella (more a novelette). It is traditional in form and manner (apart from being written in the second person, which tends, when done well, as here, to increase your involvement in the story), but all the more effective for that.

An impoverished historian takes a job with an incredibly old woman, turning the memoirs of her long-dead husband into something publishable. But while he lives in her unlit and mysterious house, he becomes enchanted with the only other occupant, the beautiful Aura. Aura appears to be in thrall to the old woman, but the historian's decision to rescue her leads to disturbing ramifications. What began life looking like an old-fashioned ghost story turns into a tale of manipulation and sexual vampirism whose effects become more chilling the more you think about them.

Aura first saw the light of day in Mexico in 1962. In 1988 Fuentes wrote an essay about it, "How I Wrote **Aura**", which is used to flesh out this very thin volume. Unfortunately, it adds nothing to the book. There are some fascinating general points about the way every writer borrows from his predecessors in an unbroken line back to the earliest myths and folk tales. But there is nothing to add to our understanding or appreciation of the original story, and it is written in so arch and self-consciously literary a style that it breaks the spell.

Paul Kincaid

Rain

Stephen Gallagher

NEL, 1990, 244pp, 12.95, £7.95 pb

Gallagher's latest novel returns to the weird *policier* subgenre he's made so much his own, but, as in **Down River**, the supernatural elements are so underplayed the unwary reader could be forgiven for missing them entirely. Indeed, since the mental stability, they could exist only in their fevered imaginations. This ambiguity is itself an integral part of a complex narrative, in which apparently straightforward situations and characters are continually pared down to reveal fresh layers of duplicity and hidden motivation.

In other words, right from the opening scene in the drizzle-soaked midnight car park of a motorway service area, we know we're firmly in *film noir* territory. When Lucy Ashdown hitches a lift South and disappears into the maelstrom of London in an obsessive search for the hit-and-run driver who killed her sister Christine, her father enlists the aid of Joe Lucas, a police officer and friend of the family, to bring her back. But Lucy doesn't want to be found. Following her sister's year-old trail she finds herself being drawn literally into Christine's past life, while an increasingly desperate Lucas, equally adrift in a strange and threatening city, tries to track her down before history repeats itself.

The identity of the killer will probably come as little surprise to most attentive readers, but by that time the solution to the mystery has become secondary to the psychological complexities of Gallagher's most sympathetic and terrifying monsters to date. Lucy and Joe are mirror images of one another, locked in conflict, but equally willing to use, manipulate, and even destroy the lives of anyone who crosses their paths if it helps to achieve their goals.

And always, in the background, lies the heart of London itself; a neon-lit urban purgatory, bounded by the Soho vice trade and Cardboard City, capable of swallowing either protagonist alive without noticing.

Unquestionably Gallagher's finest novel yet, **Rain** confirms his position alongside Campbell and Herbert in the front rank of British writers spinning tales of unease from the material of modern urban living.

Alex Stewart

The Orbit Science Fiction Yearbook Two

David S Garnett (Ed)

Orbit, 1989, 347pp, £4.99

Best of year collections are a notoriously treacherous breed, subject to editorial whim, and at the mercy of educated readers and critics who frequently disagree with the selection offered. Some operate as yearbooks, providing a detailed survey of the year's developments, both through the fiction reprinted and through the accompanying commentary -- the finest examples being Dozois' annual SF collection, and more recently, Datlow and Windling's best fantasy and horror collections. One might expect this of David S Garnett's best of the year choice, particularly given the word "Yearbook" in the title. However, it's a misnomer: this is very much Garnett's own personal choice of stories, even when accompanied by his iconoclastic view of 1988, and John Clute's more measured appraisal of the genre, and not an objective survey of the year's goings-on. How else would one explain such anomalies as a British yearbook including a mere three British writers among its selection of twelve? Garnett has already stated that his selection is based firmly on his own tastes, as good a criterion as any, but this really shouldn't be confused with an objective survey of a year's output.

Having said that, this is an enjoyable if uniform collection. One is left in no doubt as to Garnett's taste in SF, tending to the hi-tech, and any uncertainty will be dispelled by a brisk attack on the fantasy genre later in the collection. The familiar names, Watson, Di Filippo, Ballard and Zelazny, rub shoulders with up and coming writers like Ian McDonald as well as such comparative unknowns as Sharon Farber, Jack Massa and Kathe Koja. Forced to choose a favourite, for there were several I particularly enjoyed, I would probably plump for McDonald's "Vivaldi", or perhaps Di Filippo's "A Short Course in Art Appreciation".

An introduction from Lucius Shepard adds a little extra gilding to the package, though his fascinating but hardly prefatory discussion of the approach to writing should have exchanged places with Garnett's splendid piece of polemic, "This Was the Future". This is a man who has strong, well-argued opinions on the nature and development of science fiction, and it is a shame that he allows them to skulk in the last few pages of the book, rather than reinforcing his editorial presence by giving them greater prominence. Brian Aldiss' "Thanks for Drowning the Ocelot" fails entirely to make an impression on me, in common with his contribution to the first yearbook, in which case I acknowledge my blind spot. A good collection then, not a great one, not in the same league as Dozois, but valuable as one man's view of the genre.

Maureen Porter

The Drive-In

Joe R Lansdale

NEL, 1990, £2.99 pb; Kinnell, 1990, £10.95 hc

The Drive-In 2

Joe R Lansdale

Bantam, 1990, $3.95 pb; Kinnell, £1990, no price hc

Cold in July

Joe R Lansdale

Bantam, 1990, $3.95 pb; Zeising, 1990, no price hc

Just about the hottest new name in American horror is Joe Lansdale. From the rawness of his first novel, **Act of Love**, he has developed into one of the most original "cracked" voices of our usually very conservative genre. **The Drive-In** sees Lansdale have a whole multi-screen drive-in complex in Texas, kidnapped by aliens intent upon making their own blood, guts and gore B-movies. The action is fast and furious as the entrapped viewers, surviving on a diet of pop-corn, soft drinks and hamburger, plunge into an abyss of hyperglycaemia. There's cannibalism, murder, rape, and the Pop-corn King preaching through the pop-corn concession's tannoy system about the values of chainsaw wielding in the movies and its relevance to life.

At the end, our heroes, Jack, Bob and Crier, drive off across a landscape they believe to be Earth. Boy, are they wrong! The survivors of the aliens' B-feature are dumped on a planet with reject movie prop dinosaurs and a forest of living, leech-like celluloid. Of course, you can't have a successful horror flick these days without a sequel, and we're off on another sicko extravaganza. We encounter a new creature, Popalong Cassidy, a survivor from the first movie who now has a television where his head should be and a taste for B-western clothing, and a foxy little

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heroine, Grace, with a great line in kung fu moves. One of the lead characters spends a lot of his time dead. Of course the boys and gal have to bury him when he starts to smell the car out, but in the meantime we have some classic slapstick comedy.

Cold in July sees Lansdale in more serious mood: a cracking little thriller with blind alleys all over the place. Richard Dane shoots a burglar one night and has to contend with Ben Russel, the guy's father, in vengeful mood. Until they discover the burglar wasn't Russel's son afterall. Dane and Russel become allies in a search for the truth, and we meet one of the greatest comic private eyes ever invented in Jim Bob Luke, who is also ruthlessly effective at what he does. This is one of the best thrillers I've read in along while: Lansdale might not be Thomas Harris, but he's got a highly unique voice regardless of the genre he happens to be working in at the time.

Dave Hodson

Konrad

David Ferring
GW, 1990, 228pp, £4.99

This is a Games Workshop book. It is a Warhammer story. It is written in a very simple style, like this. The protagonist, surprisingly named Konrad, starts the story as a dogsbody in an inn. His requisite wild talent is an ability to see into the future occasionally. Konrad manages a brief affair with the lord of the manor's daughter before his village is sacked by the forces of chaos. He sets off into the world and becomes squire to a worldly-wise mercenary. In the battles that follow there's a hint of some connection with Sigurd Helden-hammer, an heroic figure from the past. Unsurprisingly, as this is the first book of a "a thrilling fantasy trilogy" (sic), we don't find out any more about this, nor about Konrad's master, nor about Konrad's vision that his girlfriend will betray him -- can she possibly have survived, to reappear in the next book? Gosh. Nor do we find out anything about the mysterious Bronze Warrior, nor even *why* the forces of chaos should want to raze a tiny little village in the middle of nowhere. In fact, the plot has more loose ends than a sheep. About the only difference between the adventures of Konrad and those of Noddy in the Wild Woods is that Konrad does rather a lot of gobblin-chopping. I would say that this book was a mass of disconnected incidents set in a matrix of gratuitous violence, if that didn't seem to be taking it too seriously. You have to consider that this sort of thing is just another role-playing accessory, and as someone who used to be a socially inept teenage gamesplayer, I'm not going to cast the first stone. Just remember that this isn't what you or I would call speculative fiction; it's merchandising.

Gareth Davies

The Knight and Knave of Swords

Fritz Leiber
Grafton, 1990, 304pp, £13.95 , £7.95 pb

Some 25 years ago I discovered fantasy. I remember three series of stories: Elric, Jack Vance's "Dying Earth", and Fafhrd and The Grey Mouser. It seems the latter are still going strong.

This book isn't a novel, but four linked stories set on or around Rime Island, with the same cast of characters and in chronological order.

The first two stories are short: "Sea Magic", has Fafhrd fighting and beating the supernatural, and "The Mer She" has the Grey Mouser doing something similar. The second was better, although the Mouser's actions did not always seem in character. "The Curse of the Smalls and the Stars", a longer story, has Fafhrd and The Grey Mouser cursed with traits of old age plus Assassins are after them. The fourth, "The Mouser goes Below", is virtually a small novel. It starts with an irate Loki demanding that Death take

The Grey Mouser and continues from there.

This last story is the best of the bunch, perhaps because it's length let's Leiber develop it, but sadly none really contains the magic of the early stories, or maybe that magic is just the rose tint of time. Fafhrd and The Grey Mouser have got older along with me; they have settled on Rime Island, have permanent lovers and are merchants more than adventurers; it's only others who won't let them have a quiet life.

Surprisingly, for Leiber is a fine writer, the writing is uneven. Words such as "aforenarrated" are cumbersome and I really did think people had stopped using "gibbous moon" years ago.

This book is not going to add to the collection of awards which Leiber deservedly has, but it's not unreadable. But I'm disappointed, I'm not sure I want the heroes to get old and I expected more than this from Leiber. Perhaps those early stories weren't all as good as I remember and I think it best that I don't reread them to find out.

Tom A Jones

The Start of the End of it All

Carol Emshwiller

Women's Press, 1990, 163pp, £4.95

No one writes like Carol Emshwiller," says Harlan Ellison. "And no one ever has." In a typically-Ellisonian encomium he also suggests she is "as close to being the pure artist as any writer I have ever met."

This is going to be tricky. Emshwiller's stories are... opaquely symbolic. Surreally fantastic. Largely incomprehensible.

Some are parables: "Eclipse", about a submissive woman at a party who achieves a degree of confidence performing on a flute she cannot play. Some are baffling parables: "Living at the center", or how there came to be a fat woman on the beach at Omphalo, who lies on a torn piece of sail eating periwinkles and watching the ships in the bay. Some are plain baffling: I defy anyone to make sense of "Acceptance Speech" or "The Institute" with its crude gynaecological drawing straight out of John Berger.

All are symbolic, although symbolism unfettered by any clear referent is like a Rorschach test, affording a different meaning to each and every reader. "Looking Down" is about a bird that eats a cat and a snake, kept chained and blindfolded; interpretations on a postcard, please.

Birds, cats, gods, libraries, all feature repeatedly. Some stories do communicate: "Fledged", about a man visited by his ex-wife disguised as a bird; "The Circular Library of Stones", where an old woman threatened with being put in a home finds some meaning in the excavation of the ruins of an old library. None are a great deal of fun to read.

Emshwiller, I think, provides her own definition of her fiction, in "The Circular Library of Stones": "a literature that is two things at once, which we can only do in drawings where a body might be, at one and the same time, a face in which the breasts also equal eyes..."Her collection is published by The Women's Press. She writes from a sometimes explicitly feminist standpoint: "I love. I love. Luff... loove... loofe... they can't pronounce it, but they use the word all the time. Sometimes I wonder exactly what they mean by it, it comes so easily to their lips" refers to the aliens in the title story, and presumably also sums up some women's view of men.

I am prepared to admit I might be missing the necessary mental equipment to appreciate the points being made, therefore.

Martin Waller

The Rainbow Gate

Freda Warrington

NEL, 1990, 381pp, £13.95

With four of the **Blackbird** sequence of fantasy novels behind her, Freda Warrington has bravely cut out new ground, fulfilling the early promise of dark fantasy glimpsed in her work. This story begins in the real world, Leicester, with Helen still emotionally hurt by her broken marriage to Nick. She is visited by her friend from her childhood, Rianna. Their meeting ressurects memories of the other-world she and Rianna shared as youngsters in Charnwood Forest. Then strange things start happening: Rianna seems compelled to make intricate, beautiful dolls (ideal for Helen's craft shop, but somehow sinister...), Helen finds herself *in* the world of their shared childhood; Nick dies, apparently killed by one of Rianna's dolls...

A tale of life and death and afterlife, well told. Their are moments of poignance and suspense, and of sheer terror. The parallel world is Tevera, where she finds the beautiful life-loving Chalcenians and the morbid death-worshipping Domendrans, the latter seemingly always wallowing in bouts of intense depression. The apparent divisions between light and dark, good and bad begin to blur, and the terrible sense of loss that accompanies the small victory at the end lingers long after the book is put down. The characters are well drawn, talking like real people as opposed to fantasy quest automatons and space-ship captains; their emotions are bared, they behave irrationally and inconsistency and evince human indecision and other foibles. Some of the prose conjures up simply beautiful images, but it would detract from the author's story to elucidate.

I hope Freda Warrington will continue to tread new ground; she has a gift for making her characters believable and real, with a menacing dark edge to some. As a dark fantasy, **The Rainbow Gate** is a very satisfying read and a brave departure.

Nik Morton

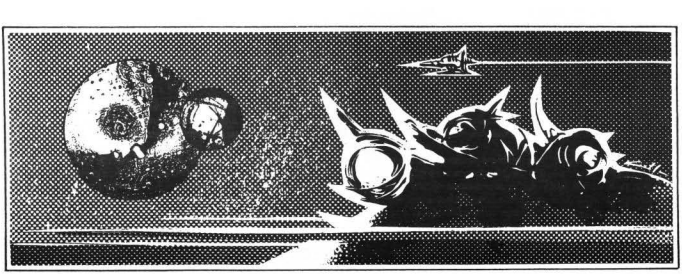
Secret Harmonies

Paul J McAuley

Gollancz, 1989, 333pp, £13.95

Paul McAuley, everyone assures me, is a bright new hope for British sf. If you don't normally like British sf, read this book, and reconsider.

The prologue is pure **Analog**: good hard sf. But its inscrutable alien aboriginals, brutish cigar-butt-chewing policewoman and gentle



Artwork by Kevin A Cullen

phylogenist stereotypes are more than offset by a genuinely funny talking dog and a sympathetic bisexual(?) local boy guide. This is not *just* hard sf.

The main text gives three interwoven personal views of an armed insurrection on a colony world. As it was first colonised by the Australian member-states of the USA, it has a wonderfully strange English/Australian flavour. We share the experiences of three heroes (not "protagonists" -- these guys are real heroes), two inside and one outside the city the revolution is aimed at -- although none of them belong where they are. Confusingly, the world's central computer has achieved self-awareness and is also planning to usurp power. Thus we experience aspects of the unromantic reality of civil war: not knowing who the enemy is; tense, bored, waiting for combat; disappearing friends; and incomprehensible acts of defence -- and, when fighting does come, it's nasty, brutish, short, and inconsequential. The plot's resolution is, however, far more complex and satisfying than this over-simple resume can suggest.

There is taut writing. "Rick was so wired that he could not sleep, for all that his eyeballs flatly ached with exhaustion", evokes a precise state of body and mind. This could become wearing were it not used sparingly, as here, to highlight experiential peaks.

This is not to say the book has no faults. The story *felt* much smaller than what is described. But rather than try to identify the source of this feeling, I would point to the book's overabundent compensation: because it has hidden depths too. The epigraphs point the way: lines from Milton's **Arcades** hint at the vital part music plays (as does the title); and Godel's uncertainty theorem indicates the root of the plot's complexity. The chapter titles also pun outrageously -- I'm already looking forward to reading this book again.

However, this extra-textual fun-and-games is not a vital part of the enjoyment of the book: it is a bonus. The literal story, there for anyone to read, is evidence enough of this book's worth.

Paul Brazier

Mercurius

Patrick Harpur

Macmillan, 1989, 478pp, £12.95

The Hope

James Lovegrove

Macmillan, 1990, 232pp, £12.95

There is little that links these books beyond an indication of how much the tropes and feelings of science fiction have found their way into the mainstream. They are both resolutely mainstream books, but the fantastic underlies them in ways which shift them dangerously away from the world we recognise.

Harpur's novel is the more difficult of the two, a dense multi-layered book concocted from the diaries and letters of two people, a generation apart, living in a village vicarage. The earlier of the two is the incumbent with a belief in alchemism seeking the philosopher's stone and not really comprehending the village life around him. Harpur very skilfully captures the pedantic tone of a 1950s seeker after ancient truths, though sometimes the manner and matter of what he says is too closely paralleled by the young woman who moves into the house in the 1980s on the run from a relationship with Harpur (he claims to be the editor of this book rather than its author). Their stories revolve around, echo and intermingle with each other in a pattern that reflects the alchemical processes, with a soupcon of **Cold Comfort Farm** to try to disguise the austere formality of the book. It is a fascinating literary exercise rather than an enjoyable novel, though it is interesting to see the correspondence across time and the alchemical magic providing an underpinning for a book that does not strictly belong within our genre.

Lovegrove's first book is more direct, more straightforward in its appropriation of things science fictional, and more effective though less ambitious. The Hope of the title is a ship five miles long, two miles wide, one mile high, displacing a thousand million tons and carrying nearly a million passengers. She is the crowning achievement of the industrial era, and like that era she is now rusted, rotting, carrying hopeless people on a meaningless voyage across an endless sea. The symbolism is, to say the least, rather obvious, and the linked stories which make up this book do tend to hammer home the images of decay and desolation. Nevertheless, Lovegrove reveals himself to be a sharp and skilful writer and some of the stories, for instance the tale of a band of engine-room workers setting off into the uncharted bowels of the mighty ship to contest against giant rats, display a far more conscious and powerful use of the genre than Harpur can manage.

Paul Kincaid

The Harrowing of Gwynedd

Katherine Kurtz

Legend, 1989, 384pp, £12.95, £6.95 pb

Sorceress of Darshiva

David Eddings

Bantam, 1989, 381pp, £12.95

I am not political. Which faction gains power, merely changing the positions of rulers and ruled, is of little interest to me - in fantasy fiction, at any rate. What interests me are the characters, the methods they employ, and their environment.

In **The Harrowing of Gwynedd** I was intrigued by the description of the Summoning of the Angels. It reads so realistically that I suspect the author has deliberately omitted certain parts of the ritual, lest it be invoked by the unworthy reader. Then there are mizmazes; not big ones you walk through, but little ones you stare at until - entranced - your mind unlocks the door into the ritual passage. That idea was completely new to me.

The Harrowing of Gwynedd is a spiritual quest set in a Celtic, mystical Dark Age, worshipping a Christ who not only sits in judgement, but also suffers such physical agony of Crucifixion that he has no pity to spare for the miseries of mere mortals. It certainly makes sense of the attributes of the Middle Ages.

Sorceress of Darshiva, on the other hand, is a physical quest, continuing the search described in the previous tomes of **The Malloreon**. Mind you, there is magick in it. I envy the ability of several characters to turn themselves into wolves or owls to go off and find what the enemy's plans are. Magick can also be used to demolish, and repair, locked doors; much to the surprise of graduates of the College of Applied Alchemy, more accustomed to blowing doors outwards by accident: "Too much sulphur! Too much sulphur!" They do however know the secret of reviving beer which has gone flat - now that really is useful. **Sorceress of Darshiva** is a must for disciples of Malloreon.

Martin Brice

Scholars and Soldiers

Mary Gentle

MacDonald, 1989, 192pp, £11.95

Mary Gentle is better known for her novels, **Golden Witchbreed** and **Ancient Light**, but she occasionally turns her hand to the short story form, as this collection demonstrates. At the time of its publication, six out of the nine stories had already seen light of day (later to be joined by a seventh), and four date back to 1983, which leads this reviewer to wonder what this collection is really all about. Bereft of commentary, there is obviously no retrospective intent, and given the age of some of the stories there is surely no thought that this is a showcase of Gentle's current work. In many respects, bringing the early stories to the readers' attention once again might do her a disservice, given the simplicity of their plot and characterisation, and in one case at least, "The Pits Beneath the World", a sickly sentimentality which does not sit well with her more recent writing.

"Anukazi's Daughter" (1984) and "A Sun in the Attic" (1985) give reasonable indication of what was to come, but the undoubted stars are the related stories, "Beggars in Satin" and "The Knot Garden", set in the same universe, and featuring The Lord-Architect Casaubon and the Scholar-Soldier Valentine, one gross and unappealing, the other an intriguing and wholly admirable woman, robust in her attitudes and equal to any man, without being one of the boys. These two stories, and to a lesser extent "Tarot Dice", show Gentle's interest in strong and competent female characters, skilled in weapons without being Amazonian, the scholars and soldiers of the title. They also reflect a preoccupation with the conflict between the rationality of science and the promise of something other-worldly only waiting its chance to break through the boundary between worlds. Her prose is baroque, almost Gothic, but just sufficiently restrained to avoid going over the top. It is not the sort of writing to be skimmed over, requiring slow steady consideration, an effort

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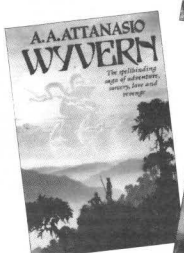

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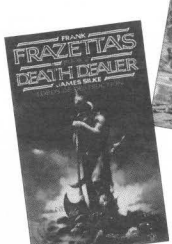

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which, with the aforementioned stories, is amply repaid. Ironically, perhaps the best example of Gentle's current style is not her own work, but Neil Gaiman's skilled pastiche in the introduction.

A mixed bag then, and sadly disappointing in parts, but for the opportunity to read "The Knot Garden", shortlisted for the 1989 BSFA Award, I will forgive the faults and imperfections of this volume.

Maureen Porter

Guards! Guards!

Terry Pratchett

Gollancz, 1989, 288pp, £12.95

This is the eighth in Terry Pratchett's highly successful Discworld series. I was very worried about writing this review because I had not enjoyed his two previous Discworld books anywhere near as much as the ones before. However, much to my relief (and pleasure), **Guards! Guards!** is, for me, his best so far.

It is a send up of all the stories with big, strong hairy chested heroes with glittery swords and shields. Without spoiling the plot too much, a guild controlled by a crazed Supreme Grand Master summon a dragon they believe they can control but can't.

The guards of the title are the dregs of the once glorious Night Watch of Ankh-Morpork. The chesty hero, brought up by dwarves, is dim enough to think that being a member of the watch is an honour (he actually *volunteers*; for everybody else it's punishment), and so innocently honest that he persuades them to mend their ways. Since he has a "practically unique" sword (the only one that is *not* magical) and a strange birthmark, you know he must be someone special - but since this is a Pratchett story he turns out to be special in an unexpected way.

We also meet an old friend, the Librarian, and delve into the mysteries of "L-space". And there is an evil despot who turns out not to be so evil after all. In fact, nothing in this story is quite what it seems to be at first, which is one of its great attractions.

Perhaps the reason for this success is that Pratchett has been working on books outside the Discworld series. Whether or not I am right about that, this was his best Discworld novel, indeed his best book so far.

Ben Gribbin

Heatseeker

John Shirley

Scream/Press, 1989, $25.00

It would not be surprising if John Shirley felt neglected in the wake of the cyberpunk hype. Though among the first Movement-linked writers to be published, he has not achieved the fame or success of either Gibson or Sterling. This collection of stories from 1975 to 1988 shows some of the reasons for this, but also suggests that he has been unfortunate.

Shirley's writing is unclassifiable: sf, horror, avant-garde mainstream, experimental. At his best, as in "What It's Like To Kill A Man", he reminds me of Harlan Ellison. His ideas come at you in a rush, hit extremely hard and are gone.

He isn't easy to read, he can be overambitious, trying things that most writers wouldn't, both in terms of style and in the juxtaposition of outrageous ideas so it (mostly) works. So *you* need to work at these stories almost as much as he worked at writing them. The "surrealism with a shotgun and a smile" which Richard Kadrey talks about on the jacket is evident from the earliest story, "Silent Crickets", in which, on the surface, a backwoods museum curator has been burning paintings.

There are the **Interzone** stories: "What Cindy Saw", a step beyond Clive Barker's best, and "The Unfolding" co-written with Bruce Sterling. There is even a PG Wodehouse humour to stories such as "Quill Tripstickler Eludes a Bride", and a very dark underbelly to "Wolves of the Plateau."

Shirley isn't, you should be warned, dealing with absolute reality; his perceived reality is a very different and disturbing thing. He has yet to hold things together long enough for one of his novels to be a real success, but his short fiction is tightly written. We should accept his challenge with vigour.

Kev McVeigh

Ignorant Armies

David Pringle (Ed)

GW Books, 1989, 252pp, £4.99

I confess, this collection places me in a quandary. Being stories by Britain's "newer" writers from a new publisher, I want to like it through solidarity if nothing else. On the other hand it is a cheerless trip through gore, small magic and much, much more. A literary nasty?Personal distaste apart, I thought no-one could write this stuff with a straight face after Norman Spinrad's **The Iron Dream**, but the post-D&D market exists and, as we know, the market is God. Hence **Ignorant Armies** and its three Warhammer companion volumes. And, if my analysis is correct, we have the explanation for the failure of this collection. Such teutonic slash and burn epics must be written with a brio born of ignorance or the artifice of a Moorcock. These authors are not ignorant, nor do the appear particularly enthusiastic about their subject matter. And none can masquerade as Moorcock.

Exceptions are Nicola Griffith with her very distinctly woman's tale and William King, who evidences the closest to enthusiasm to be found in his two of the eight tales. Others here are Charles Davidson, Sean Flynn, Brian Craig, Steve Baxter (some way below his interesting best) and Jack Yeovil. Illustrations are by artists mostly unknown to me, with the exception of Jim Burns. Like the stories, they are well wrought, but seem to lack inspiration.

What really disturbs me about this collection is its *raison d'etre*: an identified market for stories in which bloody slaughter is the main entertainment. If you are in that marketplace you will probably enjoy **Ignorant Armies.** I'll shop elsewhere.

Martyn Taylor

Little Heroes

Norman Spinrad

Grafton, 1989, 733pp, £6.99

I like Norman Spinrad's writing, and I like rock music, but I'm unsure about his novel. There are scenes where it really takes off, but there are too many places that don't work.

Michael Moorcock describes this as "Vintage Spinrad", but vintage Spinrad is now 20 years old, and showing its age in places. The author is no longer so closely allied to his times at the street level he aims to describe. His extrapolations of street culture to the first decade of the next century ignores ordinary people and produces polarised groups of semi-criminalized "Streeties" (predominantly black or chicano), and "Zonies" whose appartments are guarded by Uzi-wielding patrols two steps up from the "Guardian Angels" of the New York subway system.

More significantly, the drug culture has been mutated. So whilst the rich snort designer dusts, the "streeties" are addicted to "wire", which is several years old at street level, which suggests it was available to the rich before that, which brings us back to 1989. Sorry, I don't believe that.

In one half of the plot, 60-year-old "Crazy Old Lady of Rock and Roll" Glorianna O'Toole (try not to laugh), who started her career backing people like Janis Joplin and Grace Slick, gathers her proteges to produce a cybernetic rock star for Muzic Inc (a company which makes Stock, Aitken & Waterman appear the cutting edge of rock'n'roll). Fortunately, I believe Spinrad is parodying contemporary lyrics with the banal lines here.

Meanwhile, on the streets Karen Gold (an unemployed, homeless computer engineer) meets up with the Reality Liberation Front, a group of creative anarchists "led" by Markowitz. It is when he speaks of breaking out of the system, and into a positive anarchy of individual creative expression, that Spinrad comes to life. The scenario is ridiculous but the politics are thought-provoking.

The more I think about it, the less I like in **Little Heroes** but it dragged me through. Despite his dubious projections, Spinrad's writing is exciting. His street culture may be exaggerated, but the language which mixes bastardised English and Spanish to great effect, is the other success in this novel. I suspect that if you allow yourself to be absorbed by this book you will enjoy it, but it doesn't survive close scrutiny.

Kev McVeigh

The Queen of Springtime

Robert Silverberg

Gollancz, 1989, 415pp, £13.95

It is the far future. A star has passed through the far reaches of the solar system causing "death stars" (presumably meteors) to rain

down upon the Earth for hundreds of thousands of years. Dust in the atmosphere blocked the sun's rays, and the glaciers returned. Now the skies have cleared and the sun shines, the People have left their cocoons and are repopulating the land.

The hjiks, apparently descendents of ants, have survived the long winter. The people hate and fear the hjiks, who occasionally steal their children to rear in the hive. Then the hjik Queen sends envoys into the cities of the people offering a truce which will pen the People into their current lands forever.

This is the story not only of the People and the hjiks but also of Nialli Apuilana and Thu-Kimnibol. She, daughter of the queen of Dawinno, was stolen by the hjiks when a child and reared for a short time in the nest; he is a warrior, but not without intelligence. Initially they represent two opposing views about how their relationship with the hjiks should develop, but time and circumstances change them both.

Silverberg mark I was a young writer who could quickly turn out competent sf adventures, by his own admission, basically to make money. Having made his money, Silverberg mark II appeared, a polished writer who wrote books such as **Dying Inside** and **The Stochastic Man**, books of distinction which justifiably won awards. Silverberg mark III writes large, sprawling adventures and **The Queen of Springtime** fits squarely into this mold.

It is well written and plotted, there are lots of characters at least some of which develop and change, but it doesn't grip me. I don't think this has anything to do with it being the second part of a trilogy of which I've not read the first part; the story seems to stand on its own with the background provided in a largely unobtrusive manner. I'm sure lots of people will enjoy this, but for me it was no more than average.

Tom A Jones

The Wall Around Eden

Joan Slonczewski

Morrow, 1989, 288pp, $18.95

The blurb says Slonczewski "uses her expertise as a biologist to envision the ecology of our own Earth after the nuclear winter of a global holocaust." This is not strictly true. The survivors are cocooned from the worst effects of the nuclear winter by an invisible, seemingly impenetrable Wall, provided by aliens for some undisclosed purpose. The revelations about the effects of the holocaust, of the bleak winter that went on and one, are graphically shown, but only in a few pages towards the end of the book. Having said that, this is an interesting work.

A young girl, Isabel, seeks what, to the elders, appears to be the unanswerable. She was born into a primitive society: milling corn, weaving cloth and sharing community burdens. Restricted lives; passive acceptance of the alien enclaves. As we learn a little more of the people, we admire their tenacity, but want Isabel to succeed. Characters die, for radiation seeps in through the groundwater - if the aliens are so benign and technically superior perhaps they could have prevented that? The answer is provided in Isabel's sad realization, when the "purpose" of the aliens is guessed at last.

The people are realistically drawn, with human failings; they make mistakes, suffer pangs of jealousy, and some, even the good brave ones, die. There are no clear cut villains. No spectacular heroics, no melodrama, just reasonable storytelling. The aliens are not impregnable, but their retaliation to the death of their "angelbees" is to spread sleeping gas through the township for a week or so... Benign, mysterious, but not evil. There is a world of understanding in here, which would repay a second reading.

Nik Morton

Orbital Decay

Allen Steele

Legend, 1990, 414pp, 14.95

When I see that the publisher believes he is doing himself a good turn by quoting Gregory Benford's opinion of this book on the dust-wrapper, I realise that I'm in for a long hard slog. His encapsulation of the book's appeal is that it "Reads like golden-age Heinlein." Readers to whom this is a complete condemnation of any book may skip the rest of this review; in essence I agree for once with Benford.

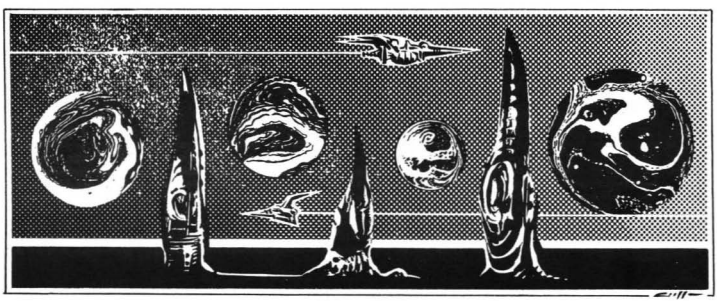
Heinlein sought to maintain suspense and to make his characters believable. A populist, he believed in giving his readers high technology - though of course much of what he foresaw when he wrote his forties works now seems outdated, cliched and even downwright corny. Steele does not let this worry him: he writes today as though he were living in the forties.

The science is certainly as accurate as one could expect: he cites a rollcall of NASA and SF friends and contacts who have vetted his text and, one imagines, advised on the very construction not only of his 21st-century Olympus Station (which, as you feared, he has then trivialised by calling it*Skycan*) but of the weak and patchy plot the book provides for your delectation.

Yet still the sheer bathos shines through at every turn. Thus, we are out in Space, and Our Hero informs that "There's no such thing as summer out here, you know, not unless your keeping track of the baseball season." Please tell me that spacemen are not all xenophobic, as sport-crazy, and as home-orientated as this - please!

The book abounds in long paragraphs, self-apologetic asides, weak excuses to launch out on life stories, and astonishingly boring purple patches of introspection. And while Our Hero does try to distance himself from the views of other characters, we are treated to a fascistic scientist's assertion that "Scientists are not responsible to the people." They

Artwork by Kevin A Cullen



are, he claims, "responsible to whoever has bankrolled their research." Do we hear echoes of the Nuremburg Trials here, or the recent ecological disasters wreaked on our planet by multinationals?

But let's skip to the denouement, for even if you decide to inflict the book on yourself, this won't hurt at all. As he lies dying in a lunar crevasse, Our Hero meditates on what he announces - with capital initials - as the Greatest Discovery Ever Made. It is, in fact, "the view of Earthside... No matter how far away we go, no matter what we do out there, we have only one real home, our common heritage." Where, no doubt, we all keep in touch with the baseball season.

Ken Lake

Majestic

Whitley Stieber

Macdonald, 1990, 317pp, 12.95

This is the strangest novel I've ever read. Not many novels, nowadays, claim to be based on "a factual reality that has been hidden and denied" involving flying saucers, and give the author's address on the last page, as a source of further information. But that is not the only strange thing about it.

It has a blurb which will put off many scientifically minded readers. According to the blurb, Strieber is "the bestselling author of **Communion** and **Transformation** and the novel is based on the "true incident" that: "In 1947 an unusual aircraft crashed in the desert of New Mexico, near the Roswell Army Air Base, scattering debris unlike anything previously found on this earth - strangely marked scraps of an unknown substance thinner than silk and utterly indestructible". Anyone hoping to find out what the strange markings meant or how a substance can be "indestructible" will be disappointed".

In his photograph on the back cover, Strieber looks like a cross between a military man and an evangelist and, indeed, the author shows considerable knowledge both of military matters and the bible. All the ingredients of an American bestseller are here: Coke, food and cigars, chains of command going right up to President Trueman, levels of secrecy and talk of commies, nasty violence and large helpings of sex. In the early chapters, Strieber shows evidence of a sense of humour but, towards the end, is deadly serious in his attempts to frighten and confuse the reader.

The novel is written almost entirely in short sentences and short paragraphs, which can pack a punch rarely found in British writing. The biblical simplicity and symbolism can set up powerful reverberations in the mind. Being supposedly based on facts, it is freed of some of the normal limitations of novels. An ordinary novel must make sense. But Strieber, if confronted with the far-fetchedness of what he writes, could retort: "Don't ask me how it could happen. It just happened".

In an Afterword, referring to the creatures who operate flying saucers as "the others" (not aliens from another planet), Strieber writes: "Fantastically, despite all the obvious proof to the contrary, the fiction that the others don't exist is rigorously maintained as official policy and generally excepted by the scientific establishment." But he is writing about the official policy in the United States. And any intelligent reader will surely ask: what about other countries? Why should they maintain the same policy? And if the flying saucers don't fly over them, why should the United States be uniquely favoured?

Jim England

The Dark Door

Kate Wilhelm

Gollancz, 1990, 248pp, 13.95

Puzzles of the Black Widowers

Isaac Asimov

Doubleday, 1990, 254pp, 10.95

It is easy to tell which books are written because bills have to be paid. Ms Wilhelm must have had a particularly large bill to pay. **The Dark Door** appears to be aimed at three separate sub-groups of the book-buying public: those who like stories about aliens; those who like stories about dark, evil nothing-posses haunting large old deserted mansions; and those who like whodunnits. Unfortunately she spoils the story for everybody by revealing all in the prologue.

The sleuths are a husband and wife team, psychologist Constance Leidl and ex-policeman Charlie Meiklejohn, who have featured in other Wilhelm crime novels. They are hired by an insurance cartel to investigate a series of arson attacks on old, disused hotels. Charlie soon discovers that these fires are preceded by an outbreak of lethal madness in the local population. As we are told who and how in chapter one, we know it is only a matter of time before Charlie and Constance team up with the arsonist to combat The Evil.

It is a pity that the structure does not allow for any suspense, because the narrative is well paced and could have made a gripping thriller. This is an exceedingly disappointing book in need of ruthless editing and rewriting. That it comes from such an experienced writer makers it even more disappointing. Despite its obvious targetting, I can't see many serious readers wanting to read it.

Isaac Asimov's **Puzzles of the Black Widowers** follow a definite formula: a mystery is presented over dinner which the gathering try to solve, but end up stumped, leaving Henry, the waiter, to come up with the answer. These are light, unpretentious stories, written purely to entertain and provide some mental gymnastics for those wishing to indulge. An there is nothing wrong with that.

Valerie Housden

Diggers

Terry Pratchett

Doubleday, 1990, 153pp, 8.95

Diggers, the sequel to **Truckers**, follows up on the nomes, a race of little people who live on Earth and move and talk so fast that humans seldom notice them. In the first book of what is turning out to be a trilogy (and unfortunately, the sort of trilogy that leaves you hanging in the air at the end of Book Two) the little people escaped from The Store, which was about to be demolished, in (you guessed) a truck, and started life in the country (actually, in a quarry; which might just give you a clue to the origin of the title of the latest book).

Both the nome books are intended for children, but might be enjoyed by older people (the Discworld books, of course, are intended for older people, but might be enjoyed by children). A lot of the story depends on the way the nomes misunderstand the activities of human beings. This might be intended as a comment on the way children and adults lead separate lives. In this book the nomes discover their home is to be destroyed again, and yet again have to flee. Things are made complicated by the fact that all their activity has at last made the big people aware that something is going on. And the reader is made increasingly aware that there is a history to these nomes that extends further back in time and space than seemed at first. Though still clearly aimed at young readers, **Diggers** has a greater plot than even this outline suggests, but I won't give it away here.

Keen Discworld fans will find this more of a serious adventure than a laugh on every page. I also had some quibbles with the book because it is very much part two of a trilogy, and leaves the story unresolved. Although still good fun **Diggers** is not, in my opinion, as good as **Truckers**.

Ben Gribbin (with John Gribbin)