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Vector

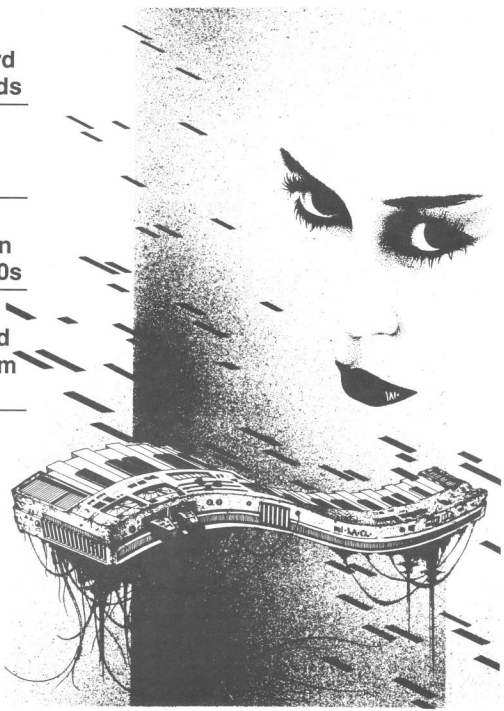
The Critical Journal of the British Science Fiction Association

Gregory Benford on Shared Worlds

David Brin Interviewed

Kim Newman on Films of the 1980s

The Uninformed Heart: Bettelheim and sf



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Contents

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Beyond the Fall of Snobbery

by Gregory Benford

Of all fields, perhaps we should expect science fiction to change most quickly, often in unexpected directions. Curiously, we often seem to cast change in the role of demon.

Nowhere is this more obvious than in the railings against "shared world" fiction. Since I stand partly indicted in this regard, by writing a book with Arthur C Clarke, **Beyond the Fall of Night**, I've been rather bemused by the froth kicked up.

I recall the furious condemnations a few years back of sequels — particularly trilogies. Does no one notice that a novel Hemingway thought the best in American literature is a sequel — indeed, following on a *boy's* book, **Tom Sawyer**?

So it goes with sharing common literary ground. Are we thrown into moral confusion when we hear **Rhapsody on a Theme by Paganini**? Do we indignantly march from the concert hall when assaulted by **Variations on a Theme by Haydn**?

Does it truly never occur to critics that reinspecting the assumptions and methods of classical works could yield new fruit? That a fresh narrative could both strike out into new territory while reflecting on the landscape of the past? Recall that **Hamlet** followed on and drew from several earlier plays about the same plot.

I make no general case about "franchising" or shared world works, precisely because they are so varied in method and accomplishment. There is the Thieves' World series (which apparently began that particular approach); Heroes in Hell; various military motifs; Silverberg's homages to several earlier writers, including CL Moore and Joseph Conrad; stories set in worlds invented by Isaac Asimov and Clarke, notably the series by Paul Preuss; the new offshoot of the Tor Doubles in which newer writers write sequels or prequels to classic novellas... quite a range. It seems to me that the presence of several such stories on Nebula and Hugo ballots argues for some quality.

Well edited (and there's the rub), a project can employ diverse talents at their best. My first experience was with Heroes in Hell, which got two award nominations that I recall, and one Hugo. Yet the series overall failed because of lack of a sure editorial hand. I realized matters had gone awry when I never heard anything about what the other authors were doing, and ended up writing my second and last piece in the dark.

Some recent commentators (notably Brits: David Garnett, John Clute) speak sloppily from a deep well of ignorance about this, *refusing* to read any such work, ascribing to the authors only greed. Nonsense, in general. John Clute has ceased to fathom much of what goes on in sf, and actively regards success as a sign of failed standards.

There are more reasoned responses: Norman Spinrad and Gardner Dozois think it represents a terrible decline of artistic standards. There are occasional mutterings about how the field is seeing more "generic" works, meaning action-adventure which merely uses sf props. This last observation is quite true, but independent of shared worlds; it's an outcome of the need for product, driven by chain stores.

I'm reminded of John Berger's definition of hack work, describing oil painting in **Ways of Seeing**, as "... not the result of either clumsiness or provincialism; it is the result of the market making more insistent demands than the art." Fair enough; but this can happen in any context. Working in a known region of concept-space does not necessarily imply that territory has been mined out. Nor is fresh ground always fertile.

Behind a lot of repugnance for the market is that old stereotype: the artist as Great Man. Such wonderful figures are consumed by struggle, partly against lack of understanding, partly against hunger, partly against inner demons. This is a peculiarly western vision, a romantic one, and it falsifies our own experience enormously. And in contemplating the life of professionals, believers in this hoary image go for the easily understood, sophomoric motivation: bucks.

Of course money matters. But let me speak for myself. I didn't undertake to write **Beyond the Fall of Night** with Arthur Clarke for money; I have quite enough. I did it to get at material I could not otherwise, and to point up my subject by a direct comparison with a classic meditation from another age.

The topic came up while Arthur and I were spending a pleasant summer afternoon touring the Air & Space Museum in Washington, DC, escorted by the present museum director and Fred Durant, a past director and old friend of Arthur's. We began to speculate on how spacecraft could change in the *really* long term. That led to wondering how far one could plausibly extrapolate into the future with known scientific laws. With **Against the Fall of Night** Clarke opened grand new themes in sf, and reflection on what events and scientific progress have done to those ideas since could tell us much, I thought. Fred Durant added that the possibilities now were so much larger than anyone, even Arthur, could have glimpsed then.

I remarked on how that novella ends with a compressed plot summary of things which might happen thereafter — but did they? I'd always wondered. The idea of trying to think beyond the world of 1948 science, within which he created **Against**, came up naturally.

My far future, in fact, differs radically from his, yet is consistent with his vision. (**Huck Finn** didn't contradict **Tom Sawyer**, either; that's one of the rules.) In 1948 nobody knew of DNA or saw the potential of bioengineering. And there have been black holes, cosmological changes galore, and much else since. By writing beyond where Arthur had left off, I could also comment on how time changes aesthetic and other attitudes. Maybe I could even slip in a little sex... The prospect was too tasty to pass up.

Generally, I see no reason why several authors, writing under common assumptions, cannot produce admirable work. The fact that marketing practices stress One Big Name in the packaging is perhaps sad, but I think well-meaning critics like Norman Spinrad underestimate our savvy readers. A quick glance at jacket copy tells them what they're getting. As recent a success as **Poodle Springs**, in which Robert Parker completed the manuscript Raymond Chandler struggled with while dying, points out a certain engaging zest can come of such work.

Much of the attitude about this practice strikes me as a warmed-over version of the High Aht vs Low Commerce cliché. Nonsense, of course. One of the critics' worse habits is seeing literature in moral terms alone. Refusals to read any work besmirched by this "taint" is simple-minded and, in a critic, cowardly. It is judging a book not merely by its cover, but by its contract.

Commerce means contradiction, freedom, the right to be wrong. Even, yes, the right to be tacky.

I'd rather take the positive view: What new avenues does this evolution of the field open? How do we criticise the work? What's permissible? (I'll grant that not everything is.)

These are interesting questions which require that we reinspect our assumptions. They could help us all understand where this fast-moving genre is taking us. We, above all, must consider change with an open mind. And I, for one, don't think our destination is some dreadful commercial abyss.

The above article arrived after the copy date, but because of its somewhat controvertial ideas we felt we had to squeeze it in somewhere, thus the editorial we had intended to run has been shelved until next time. - BP

Letters

Reviewing

Cecil Nurse, Gareth Davies and others struggle to explain what motivates a book reviewer and how reviews should be used, but miss the main point.

Seeing a book title advertised, you look first for its author: if you are familiar with previous works, that may help you decide whether to buy this one — but while you may pick up a copy and read the blurb, you are aware that this is the publisher's best attempt to persuade you to buy, not any kind of balanced view of the contents.

Cecil points out that we reviewers do not get to choose the books we are asked to review. True, but on several occasions I have begged Paul Kincaid or Andy Sawyer to send me this or that title because I feel I shall something helpful to say about it. On at least one occasion too, I have repackaged and returned a book sent to me for review — I found its basic philosophy so offensive that anything I wrote would coloured by my utter distaste, and I felt someone more in tune with that outlook should have the chance to write about instead.

Both BSFA magazines have an excellent and varied panel of reviewers. Just as every book bears the name of its author as a guide to you of its contents and style, so every review is labelled with a name so that we can say "Ah, I always approve of K's reviews" or "Y's reviews always annoy me — we have nothing in common." If (as in older times) reviewers' names were kept secret, you would have cause to complain, for that name is your guide to interpreting the review itself.

Every BSFA member's likes and dislikes differ from every other member's: how, then, can they expect all reviewers to express identical views? We have been selected for a number of reasons, of which one has to be that we are regarded as having some expertise and some sf background — asking a neo to review Harrison's "Eden" trilogy would be as stupid as asking a **Sun** reader's view of **Vector**.

Western saloons used to sport a sign: "Don't shoot the pianist: he's doing his best." The point is that the pianist didn't write the music — he merely interprets it and puts his own gloss upon it. If you, dear reader, feel you'd make a better pianist, ask to be added to the panel. But first, be honest enough to admit your own built-in bias, your own inadequacies and your own preferences.

Ken Lake

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V156 - Editorial

I must take exception to Kev McVeigh's Editorial in **V156**. It seems such a seductive proposal: There are new writers out there, but not enough is being done to promote them. New writers are, by definition, more deserving of our support than boring old farts. Therfore, we shouldn't waste time and space on the latest volume in an interminable fantasy by David Eddings but instead devote time and space and money to the struggling new writers. This injunction, presumably, being directed at publishers and readers as well as reviewers. It is seductive — but it is wrong!

Is it true that not enough is being done to support new writers? Well, there seem to be a lot of new writers about at the moment, and I would suggest that they are so visible precisely because a lot more is being done to support them than Kev would suggest. For a start, and far and away the most important thing, they are being published. Pan is publishing Eric Brown. Simon & Schuster is publishing Kim Newman. Macdonald is publishing Anne Gay. Gollancz is publishing Keith Brooke. Unwin is publishing Gill Alderman and Colin Dixon and Simon Ings. At the same time NEL, Legend, Unwin, Macdonald and GW Books have all published original anthologies (a lifeline for new writers which I, as a "new writer", am most grateful for). I have been involved in science fiction for 15 years, and I cannot remember a time when so many British publishers have done so much for so many new British writers.

These new writers are getting into print, their work is available in bookshops, it is bought and read, it is reviewed, and they are being brought to people's attention enough for people like Kev to fulminate against how little support they are getting (which is all part of the publicity process as well). Of course more could and should be done, of course some writers will slip, undeservedly, through the net. That is the way of things. We should continue to rail against it, we should do what is in our power to prevent it, but we should not let that blind us to what is being done.

Nor should we let it prompt us to wild and ridiculous demands on the part of the new writer. It is unrealistic, for instance, for Pan to put the same promotional budget behind Eric Brown than they do behind, say, Larry Niven. In all probability, Brown's first book will make a loss, and a huge publicity budget would be more likely to increase the loss and so make it more difficult to publish anything by Brown (or any other new writer) in the future. If, however, the loss is not too great and the book gathers some respectable sales figures and reviews, then Pan will have the ammunition to put more behind him in future. I'm not saying this is how things should be, but it is how they are. And if we trample over them too violently we run the risk of hurting the new writers rather than helping them.

As for Kev's ridiculous final comments about preferring a review of a new book to the latest volume from Eddings — if you don't get both you don't get the balance or the breadth (of reviewers, of readers, of insight) to make the discovery of a new writer noticeable or worthwhile. **Vector** does review new writers (in the same issue of **Vector** in which Kev's editorial appears, there are reviews of new writers like Storm Constantine, Paul McAuley, James Lovegrove and Allen Steele, and there are reviews upcoming of new writers like Neil Ferguson, TP Newark and Anne Gay), yet we shall continue to reveiw more established writers also. Not to do so would be to fail in our duty to our members, and to our genre.

And remember, science fiction is all about discovery. Of course we can discover the pleasure of a new writer. But let us not forget that we can discover the pleasure of an established writer also. Would Kev want to deny us the chance to review new books by Christopher Priest, M John Harrison, Garry Kilworth, JG Ballard, Brian Aldiss, Keith Roberts, etc.? They've all been writing 20 years or more, we know the sort of thing they do by now, we don't need to be told about it. Or is Kev letting his prejudices show, and forgetting that science fiction fights against prejudice?

Paul Kincaid

Again, from Ken Lake:

I found [Kev's] Editorial challenging and controversial. I for one have been plugging Helen Wright's lovely book ever since I read it on the recommendation of Peter Pinto of The Paperbook Back Shop [North Road, Lancaster], and cannot understand why others have not hastened to join me.

On the other hand, I am told that it is BSFA policy not to print reviews unless a review copy has been received. I fully appreciate the reasoning here — if you don't stick to this, publishers will quit sending out copies at all.

But from time to time I encounter a book, usually by a "new"(ish) author, which is so wonderful I want to rush around telling everyone, and others which are so appalling I feel I must warn you all about them. To these ends, I have on numerous occasions sent in reviews "on spec," but have stopped doing this as they are not printed.

If the BSFA can persuade US publishers to send review copies of all upcoming sf books, that would solve all your problems; if they won't, why not at least have a separate "unsolicited reviews" or "new discoveries" section in **Vector** or **PI** (or both) in which obsessive review writers like me can appear with critical comments on books that would otherwise escape notice.

However, I do feel that you over-emphasise the importance of "most people in

British sf" who, you say, "have a tendency to ignore new authors unless they happen to be friends." To be honest, if publishers were to rely on this small, enthusiastic band of converted fans for their sales, nary an sf book would appear in Britain. Our importance — if only the publishers would listen to us — can lie only in our publicising those books they *don't* take up, pointing out the manifold stupidities of their policies when they *do* publish them, and spreading the incestuous word among our own tiny ginger group. I fail to be convinced that we affect the the Great British Public in any way at all, and it is they who buy enough copies to make sf publishing viable.

The fact that they tend to buy the works of those authors you denigrate, rather than those you praise, reflects nothing more than the ineffable ignorance of the GBP, and its impervience to our civilising influence.

Having said that, naturally I support your aims and look forward to the day when informed sf-nal reviewing will percolate through to the lay press in Britain as it has in Australia: that's where we need to make our voices heard!

Ken Lake

from Stuart Falconer

Following on from Kev's editorial in **V156**, I would like to point out a further example of lethargy on the part of the publishing/bookselling establishment.

I have been trying for some weeks to get hold of Paul J Mcauley's novel, **Four Hundred Billion Stars**. It was mentioned at the bottom of the full-page Orbit advert in IZ 35 as being "out now," (May). We are reasonably well served with booksellers in Newcastle. There is a large WH Smith — one of the largest in the country — as well as major Waterstones and Dillons branches, and an independent local outfit called Thornes. I have checked roughly once a week since the advert appeared. No one has had the book in stock. I was informed by WHS that Mcauley is not one of their stock authors (hardly surprising with a first novel) and therefore they did not keep it. I placed an order and am now keeping my fingers crossed that it will eventually turn up.

Some years ago I worked as a book department manager for WHS at one of their smaller branches (Hartlepool, in fact). The system in those days used to allow for new titles, including those by unknown authors, to be ordered on a sale-or-return basis for the first eight weeks. The number of copies ordered by the branch often depended upon how hard the publishers pushed them. Sale-or-return provided a margin of error which gave new authors a chance.

Some authors take a lot of promotion to get their careers started. (I recall Jeffrey Archer's first two books making almost no initial impact.) Strangely however, the major publicity is always reserved for those authors whose books are going to sell anyway, whereas the real effort is needed for the new authors who will otherwise remain undiscovered. It would seem, in the case of McAuley's book, that Orbit have made virtually no effort whatsoever to promote it, which makes you wonder why they bothered publishing it in the first place. Publishing is a business after all, and not a charity.

Taking up Kev's final point; yes, I would like to know more about new writers and particularly about those titles which may not be published in this country. To quote just one kind of material which could be covered, Don Webb's brilliant **Uncle Ovid's Exercise Book**, which I was lucky enough to glimpse, and which was mentioned in an earlier **Vector** editorial, is published by perhaps the only American university press not to be represented over here. It deserves to be widely read. Something about it, and the possible availability of imported supplies, would be most useful.

Stuart Falconer
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You can get **Uncle Ovid's**, and much else besides, from Andy Richards (Cold Tonnage Books, 136 New Road, Bedfont, Feltham, Middx TW14 8HT); you might also try the New Science Fiction Alliance (NSFA, Chris Reed, 16 Somersall Lane, Chesterfield S40 3LA) for other such small publications, like Misha's **Prayers of Steel** or Congor Beasley's **The Magic Deer.**

BP

Magazine Reviews

I think [that the Magazine Reviews are] the biggest innovation I've ever seen in a BSFA magazine, and long overdue. Short fiction is the cutting edge of sf, it's where the new writers appear, where new ideas are tossed about, its where all the energy is. And the "underground" magazines are the cutting edge of *short* sf. I hope its going to be a regular feature. (One thing I'm curious about: whenever there's talk of the underground press you see **New Pathways, Journal Wired, Semiotext(e)**, etc, but the one that's overlooked is **Pulphouse** — I've never actually read **Pulphouse** (can't afford to) but from what I *have* seen about it I'd have thought it would fit right in with the best of them. Any ideas why?)

Keith Brooke
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The Magazine Reviews last issue were something of an experiment, but we do hope to do something like this on a regular basis in future issues of **Vector**. The reasoning behind the genesis of the Magazine Reviews is two-fold: firstly, we recognise the importance of short fiction, *particularly* in the sf genre, and also the importance of non-fiction (including non-genre publications — **The Whole Earth Review** is one good example, having published both Bruce Sterling and Ursula LeGuin in recent years, and **Re/Search**'s JG Ballard special issue is another). Also, it's in such small/underground magazines that many sf writers began their careers, including, dare I say, a certain Keith Brooke, and where many established writers can still be found — the first issue of the American small press mag **Strange Plasma** had stories by Paul Park, Gene Wolfe, Eric Brown and RA Lafferty.

Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, we'd like to recognise the efforts of these small presses. There seems to be a general assumption that a small press isn't a "real" publisher and so whatever they publish cannot be taken seriously. Why this assumption exists is a mystery; perhaps it's because they're mostly run by amateurs from their home, with very little interest in actually making any money from their venture, but also perhaps it's the idea that if a propublisher won't publish a certain work then it must be crap, even if it eventually gets published by a small press. Whatever the reason, there are a lot of publications which deserve more than a listing under "fanzines" in **Matrix**.

Your point on **Pulphouse**: first, you've got to define the term "underground". Although this might be used to describe any publication which is small and exists beyond our normal social sphere of existence (ie, you won't find it on the shelves of your local newsagent, nor will you find much mention of it in professional publications, etc), but mostly it's used to define publications and publishers which are reactionary and against the grain. **Pulphouse**, from what I've read of it, seems to be quite conservative and traditional in its tastes, having more in common with **Asimov's** than, say, **New Worlds** or **Interzone**. There are many such "fannish" small presses — people who like to publish sf as they perceive it to be, who are quite content with the way things are (not that this makes them unworthy or "bad" magazines).

However, on the flip-side of the small press coin, **Semiotext(e)** and **New Pathways**, etc, are experimental and most definitely unconventional and non-restrictive in their definition of sf. They are reactionary and against the grain, often demanding change and diversity, often disillusioned and disatisfied with the state of modern sf and the ghetto. They are thus more

easily definable as "underground" and are quite distinct from the usual blend of small press activity, **Pulphouse** included.

BP

Demons & Dreams

I would like to thank Maureen Porter for her very nice review of **Demons and Dreams: The Best Fantasy and Horror 2** in a recent issue of **Vector** [156]. However, I'm perplexed at the criticism that we "do not provide a biography of each author. Thus one has no indication of previous publishing histories...." This simply is not so. In every instance Terri Windling and I *do* indeed provide the publishing history of each author included.

Ellen Datlow
c/o OMNI Magazine

An Appeal

Thanks to a long succession of mishaps, I am not among the writers who have been fortunate enough to establish a lasting relationship with a regular publisher — at least not in Britain; I have one in the States, but even that took years to achieve. (I could recount some horror stories...!)

As a result, I'm frequently told by people I talk to at cons and elsewhere that they are searching for this, that or the other of my novels, only to discover that it's out of print. A few items have recently resurfaced or are in the process of doing so: I have beside me advance copies of Arrow's reprint of **The Crucible of Time**, for instance, and **Stand on Zanzibar** is also due back to press. But a recent notice in an American magazine (a rarety! I seldom get reviewed nowadays) of a "classic reprint" of **The Compleat Traveller in Black** said: "... answered one long quest of mine — to finally get my hands on [these] stories." For heaven's sakes! **The Compleat Traveller in Black** first appeared — in the US — in August 1986! (Okay, the short version dates back to 1971, so he could have meant his quest for that had been a long one. Even so — !)

Most of my 'prentice work is better left on the second-hand stalls. On the other hand, there are books I feel deserve another outing. Would readers of **Vector** do me a favour and tell me which they are? Have you searched unsuccessfully for a book of mine? Let me know. It'll give my agents leverage in trying to promote a reissue.

John Brunner
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We welcome all letters on any subject to do with **Vector**, though we reserve the right to print them here and also to edit them if necessary. Please mark *clearly* anything which is not for publication as "DNQ". All letters of comment should be sent to:

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SF Cinema in the 80s

Kim Newman

Science fiction movies scooted out of the 70s on a roll with even dogs like **The Black Hole** and **Star Trek: The Motion Picture** benefitting from the commercial impetus of the Spielberg-Lucas rollercoaster that had been started by **Star Wars** and **Close Encounters**. The early 80s were distinguished by the best, most fun of the popcorn pictures in the Spielberg-Lucas vein — **Battle Beyond the Stars**, **Flash Gordon**, **Superman** — but things were already changing. **The Empire Strikes Back** and **Return of the Jedi** were mammoth superhits, but a decade later it's hard to tell them apart, or to remember much — apart from the hateful teddy bear things and other such Muppet sicknesses — that comes from them rather than **Star Wars**. **ET the Extra Terrestrial**, coming along in 1981, topped the **Star Wars** gross, and encouraged a series of benignly smug befriend-the-aliens movies from the charming **Splash!** through the sickly **Cocoon** and the mechanical **Short Circuit** to the nauseating **Mac and Me**, but it too hasn't aged all that well. The sloppiest of Spielberg's pictures, it seems like a machine-made hit, and the comparison with **Splash!** reveals just how presexually charmless its central relationship is, and the director was forced to retreat from its high ground into the **Indiana Jones** movies on one hand and spikier projects like **Empire of the Sun** and **Always** on the other. While Lucas has reserved his patronage for a succession of disastrous fantasies — **Labyrinth**, **Howard the Duck**, **Willow**, *anybody?* — Spielberg, if airily guilty of producing **Harry and the Hendersons** and ***batteries not included**, has at least sponsored the interesting career of Robert Zemeckis, more of whom later.

The most influential sf film-makers of the 80s were unquestionably Ridley Scott and Terry Gilliam, neither of whom had an unqualified commercial or critical success in the decade, and both of whom display at once a visionary grasp of the cyberpunky notion of creating "virtual worlds" and a basic lack of fundamental storytelling ability. Scott's 1979 **Alien** was the nasty flipside of **Star Wars**, an outer-space haunted house picture, and its biomechanical splatter encouraged a slew of imitations, several of which I prefer to the original. Roger Corman's schlocky **Forbidden World**, in which the creature is defeated by cancer, is one, and John Carpenter's lavish horrorshow **The Thing** is another. **Alien**, an imitation itself, seems fated to be best remembered by its own imitations, most particularly James Cameron's **Aliens** which, as those of us lucky enough to see the full cut can attest, is a deeper, cleverer and more satisfying rerun, slightly less daring in its imagery but far more impressive in its marshalling of such trivia as plot, performance and characters. Scott really became a genre superstar with **Blade Runner**, an infuriating mess of a film which accurately captures the imagery of 80s written sf way before William Gibson got to it, but trips over its original source novel all the way, and makes you realise that the only memorable people in Scott's universe are robots. Like his subsequent **Legend**, **Blade Runner** never broke even at the box office, but has been recycled by adverts for banks, soft drinks, body-sprays and such ephemera, a fact that is at once ironic and chilling.

Gilliam is actually a more interesting filmmaker than Scott, but just as frustrating in his mix of brilliance and awkwardness. **Time Bandits** is a Monty Python movie that suffers from the way it substitutes dwarves shouting at each other for humour — compare the sharpness of the recent **Bill & Ted's Excellent Adventure** as it gets to the same theme — but it nevertheless shows the kind of fairytale bizarretie the director is capable of. **Brazil** is one of the key films of the 80s, but as American distributors pointed out, it's 20 minutes too long. Marvellously set-designed, art-directed, performed and even written, **Brazil** is still like being hit over the head for an hour and a half as scene after brilliant scene makes essentially the same point. And **The Adventures of Baron Munchausen** is more of the same, finally acknowledging a debt to the truly great Karel Zeman, and full of moments you'll remember forever along with characters and a plot you forgot ten minutes after the National Anthem. Comparing **Brazil** and **Munchausen** with **Nineteen Eighty-Four** and **Erik the Viking** shows how extraordinary Gilliam is as a film-maker but, like Scott, he is probably doomed never to make a 100% good movie.

However, the innovations in design and bio-mechanoid imagery that derive from Scott and Gilliam were ready to produce the Real Thing, when combined with the overdrive pacing and generic confidence of the American genre movie. The first great synthesis of this form came from Australia, with George Miller's **Mad Max 2**, an old, old story confidently told with a despairing vision of the future and Mel Gibson's scraggy charisma to show off the way the genre was going. **Mad Max 2** is a mean movie, and it was promptly imitated all over the globe, in pictures like John Carpenter's **Escape from New York**, with its severed heads on parking meters, hordes of Italian and Filippino schlockers and even in arty items like Luc Besson's absurdist warriors of the wasteland picture **The Last Battle**. Nuke awareness came and went through the decade, with frequent "serious" movies dotted in among the **Mad Max** clones — **Threads**, **The Day After**, **Special Bulletin** and **Testament**, all TV movies, were it-could-happen-here exercises, while smaller panic items like **Miracle Mile** or period pieces like **Desert Bloom** and **Fat Man and Little Boy** concentrated on the cultural and social realities of the atomic age. However, the Bomb did encourage dreary whinges like **When the Wind Blows** and **Letters from a Dead Man**, not to mention Tarkovsky's **The Sacrifice**, so it wasn't all good stuff.

While there were big budget duds like **Saturn 3** and **Outland** trying to learn the lesson of **Alien**, the cheapies were turning out streamlined items like **Alligator**, **Android**, **Forbidden World** and **Night of the Comet**, and Cameron — who had made an inauspicious debut with **Piranha II** after some special effects work for Corman — made the first great picture of the 80s in **The Terminator**, a machine-driven, idea-filled action picture that could perhaps stand as the decade's definitive work, fuelling Paul Verhoeven's similarly hard-driving **Robocop** in the android/cyborg splatter stakes, and suggesting the time travel angle of **Trancers**, the decade's top-of-the-line "B" picture. Charles Band, producer/director of **Trancers**, had an erratic time of it and churned out a lot of creepy crappies along the lines of his **Ghoulies**, but also sponsored **Zone Troopers**, one of the decade's handful of post-modern post-genre triumphs, and Stuart Gordon's **Re-animator**, which was the mad science take on such splatter pictures as **The**

Evil Dead, finally coming up with the live action transformers of **Robot Jox**, perhaps the most expensive "B" of the period. The final product of this line of thought must be Tim Burton's **Batman**, which blends the action movie with the texture of **Brazil** and **Blade Runner**, and comes up with an absurdist comedy so dark that its success at the box office is a minor miracle. Cameron, meanwhile, slowly submerged himself in **The Abyss**, unleashing a school of similar Troy Tempest pictures (**Leviathan**, **Deepstar Six**) most of which hark back to **Alien** for their plot.

The genre auteurs of the 70s kept going despite the rising tide of direct-to-video dogs. George Romero turned in the surprisingly optimistic **Knightriders**, which might be the last Jimmy Carter era movie, before getting grim again with **Day of the Dead**, the most ruthlessly downbeat of his zombie movies, and the skilled, more conventional mad science of **Money Shines**. Like Romero, Larry Cohen was stuck with a series of films that failed to find their audience, mingling his audacious ideas with his habitual sloppiness to often wonderful effect, as in **Q, The Stuff, Island of the Alive** and a few horror pictures and thrillers. No one makes films as messy as Larry Cohen, but no one else would dare to do a picture with Michael Moriarty about killer yoghurt, so that's just the price you have to pay. David Cronenberg started the decade with **Scanners** and **Videodrome**, which have more ideas to the minute than anything else in the cinema, and also contrive to be five years ahead of anything coming out of written sf, reshaping familiar themes in a uniquely cinematic manner. Exploding heads and mammary screens became passe, and Cronenberg, like everyone else, had to make an ordinary Stephen King adaptation, **The Dead Zone**, before getting back his stride in, of all things, the remake of **The Fly**, a daringly bizarre item that did without the usual melodramatics, and the uncategorisable **Dead Ringers**.

There were lots of remakes, and harking-back movies. Carpenter's **Thing** and Cronenberg's **Fly** were authentic 80s movies with 50s roots, but Tobe Hooper's disastrous **Lifeforce** and **Invaders from Mars**, the remakes of **The Blob**, **Little Shop of Horrors**, **Not of this Earth** and **Godzilla**, derivative muscle-strainers like **Predator**, **The Running Man** and **Blood of Heroes**, and the entire **Star Trek** cycle were random and pointless, sometimes distinguished by special effects, usually not. The most successful retro-chic item of the decade was Michael Laughlin's **Strange Invaders**, although **Big Meat Eater**, **Night of the Creeps** and **Parents** also have a pleasant 50s feel, managing mainly to critique the Eisenhower decade even as Ronald Reagan was trying to bring it back. This strange strain threw up a few punk-art oddities around the edges of the genre, like Alex Cox's **Repo Man**, Joe Dante's wistful **Explorers**, the New Zealand **The Quiet Earth** and **The Navigator**, Phil Kaufman's **The Right Stuff**, Mark Romanek's **Static**, the blissfully unfashionable **The Adventures of Buckaroo Banzai**, Peter Wollen's deadly **Friendship's Death**, John Sayle's **The Brother from Another Planet**, Alan Rudolph's playful **Trouble in Mind** and the postcard-coloured **Earth Girls are Easy**, all of which seem more 80s than such machine-made gimme-some-money pictures as **Krull**, **Slipstream** or **Masters of the Universe**, not to mention the *thirtysomething* excesses of **Honey, I Shrunk the Kids**. Finally, Carpenter's **They Live** blamed the return-to-the-past feel of Reagan's America on an invasion of very 50s-style aliens.

But the ultimate 80s sf saga, replacing the leftover 60s and 70s crews of the USS Enterprise and the Star Wars saga, must be Robert Zemeckis' **Back to the Future** series. Along with his **Who Framed Roger Rabbit?**, these time travel items introduced American cinema to notions of alternate worlds, paradoxes and retro-chic hitherto confined to Eastern European pictures like **Gentlemen, I have Killed Einstein** and **Tomorrow, I'll Wake Up and Scald Myself with Tea**. Part One evokes the 50s and Part Three is a Verne-style Western, but the middle section is the most frenetic, taking a trip to a future that looks back on the 80s and finds nostalgia in figures like Khomeini, Reagan and Michael Jackson, and to an alternate present that suggests Mad Max's world gone weird. With exactly the same 80s nostalgia fever that gave rise to the rock 'n' roll designer advert revival and Reagan's *I Love Lucy* family values, the **Back to the Future** pictures dissect America, and find it wanting. Perhaps the most subversive idea in all 80s cinema is thrown away at the climax of **Roger Rabbit**, when Bob Hoskins and Roger prevent Christopher Lloyd from ruining Los angeles, and therefore avert the 80s from ever happening at all. Admittedly, the **Back to the Future II** casino hell is worse than what we lived through, with Nixon still in power, but not that much. Zemeckis' sf is about the Past, Present and Future, but at least — unlike Lucas' and Spielberg's — it's not about elves and fairies and — unlike Scott's and Cameron's — it's not about being crushed by the future. At the end of the saga, Michael J Fox asks Lloyd whether he intends to take his flying steam train time machine back to the future, and the mad scientist quips "no, I've already been there" before heading off in the present for outer space, echoing the finales of films as disparate as **Explorers**, **Big Meat Eater**, **Repo Man** and **The Right Stuff**, and suggesting that perhaps the genre, as well as science and humanity, can still grow at its own pace, can still thrive in the unknown 90s and beyond...

No one makes films as messy as Larry Cohen, but no one else would dare to do a picture with Michael Moriarty about killer yoghurt, so that's just the price you have to pay.

Already well-known for his film criticism, Kim Newman is becoming a more and more prolific author, writing as Jack Yeovil for GW Books' "Warhammer" series, publishing his second novel **Bad Dreams** (Simon & Schuster) in September, and he's also editing a book called **Wild West Movies** (Bloomsbury) — how he found the time to write the above for **Vector**, we may never know.

David Brin

profiled by Andy Sawyer

The conversation began in the splendid interior of Waterstone's bookshop in Liverpool where David Brin — in the middle of a tour to publicise his new novel **Earth** — rhapsodised about the availability of culture ("We now have more and better musicians available to us at the flick of a switch than did the Emperor of Austria.") and continued in the equally splendid if overblown (not to mention loud!) interior of a Lime Street pub.

The sf writer who is by training a scientist is not a particularly American phenomenon — as British names such as Arthur C Clarke, Brian Stableford, Robert Holdstock and Paul J McAuley remind us — but there is a particularly strong strand in North American sf which smacks of the laboratory rather than the library.

One reason for this may be the greater status in the USA of the scientist/technician, or, more accurately, the *lesser* status of such in Britain where the Humanites take precedence in the class structure and the thought of a writer not indebted to the "Great Tradition" is still dubious. Another may be the roots of US sf in magazines devoted to popular science: "scientifiction" as a literary or subliterary device for explaining the theory and effects of science. Sneering at all this seems remarkably snobbish, as if an enthusiasm for the world and how it operates is something to be condemned, something which cannot really co-exsist with good writing and magnetic narrative technique.

David Brin, whose scientific background (Caltech; research engineer; Ph.d. in Space Physics; Postdoctorate at California Space Institute; papers in journals from **Applied Optics** to the **Quarterly Journal of the Royal Astronomical Society**) is impeccable, talks about asking classes of gifted children "Who would like to live in the past?... and the *girls* would raise their hands. We've allowed women and girls to become alienated from technology, yet only a few *would* live in long dresses and then they'd only possess two or three, trailing around in the mud and dogshit." His enthusiasm for the idea that we live in a better society than at any time in the past, and the potential inherent in Western civilisation, is intense, if not uncritical. He throws out ideas illustrating sf's unique combination of popular writer and populist thinker as he explains the background to **Earth** and its concern with enviromental issues.

"Now we have the only civilisation which is capable of feeling *guilty* about its achievements, to determine *not* to despoil the environment." It's misguided, even dangerous, to idealise previous "natural" states. Previous civilisations have wrecked environments: we just have the capacity to do it on a larger scale. Within a few generations of humanity's arrival an Easter Island all the trees were gone.

"American Indians left not a single large mammal species on the continent except the bison and they were working on that, stampeding whole herds across cliffs for the sake of killing two or three." Some people talk about lost arts, "but most of the sword-makers who ever lived are working right now in the USA — and producing better products!"

Brin's first novel was **Sundiver** (1980), which so far has resulted in two sequels, **Startide Rising** (Nebula, Hugo and Locus awards 1984) and **The Uplift War** (Hugo and Locus awards, 1988). He has also published **The Practice Effect** (1984), **The Heart of the Comet** (1986: with Gregory Benford), **The Postman** (1986: Locus and John W Campbell Memorial awards) and the story collection **The River of Time**. British readers may especially remember his stories "The Giving Plague" (**Interzone** 23, Spring, 1988) and "Piecework" (**IZ** 33, January 1990). As we're in Liverpool, I pick up on the local setting of "Piecework". There are also British references in "The Giving Plague" and **Earth**. "Why confine yourself to one country?" He lived in London for a year, in 1987. "I was supposed to lecture at Westfield College but that was largely trashed by Maggie [the protagonist in "The Giving Plague" refers to "The Thatcher massacre of British Science"] so I did a lot of writing. The "local" setting and atmosphere though, largely derives from a BBC TV special on Liverpool.

The new novel, **Earth**, published by Macdonald, is Brin's biggest yet, a mosiac snapshot of the planet fifty years hence after the Greenhouse Effect has really taken hold. It's a world where refugees from drowning lowlands have taken to the sea, where Ra boys and radical Gaians bicker and posture, where skin cancer is common — and as little regarded — as sunburn is today. And where someone has dropped a micro-black hole into the Earth's core.

As well as indulging in speculation about the nature of black holes and "strings", and offering several different strands of the "Gaia hypothesis", Brin pays homage to other works of sf, and presents possibilities for the development of the next half-century. The book's picture balances between warning and celebration. It has the most unexpected "villian" nation in a limited nuclear war that has been suggested — but once you've read about it, it makes perfect, and alarming, sense. The final apotheosis is one which has occured in other works of fiction, but Brin is careful not to glorify its mystical connotations. **Earth** is a blockbuster with a multiplicity of viewpoints and a large cast of characters. If it has a flaw, it's in the nature of its structure as a symbolic murder-mystery where the identity of the villian is obvious from the start but that of the victim becomes less and less clear. But that is the point, and there's a set of deliberate ambiguities in the ending to cause the reader to think.

Earth appears at a time when media and governmental attention to environmental issues is at a unprecedented height, and both reflects and contributes to the debate. Can we survive? Brin hopes so.

"I've been called an optimist, but I don't believe it. I think we're heading for 50 *very rough* years, and the first test of maturity as a race — which is putting away paranoia and creating co-operative institutions. Tolerance and disrespect for authority is the West's great gift, as opposed to the suspicion of the others and reverence for tradition. We don't know yet, though, if this is "sane" behaviour, if it will contribute to our long-term survival, but we're seeing hopeful signs in Europe. Not just the European Community, but the entry into Europe of the Eastern Europe states."

But what about the possibility of a total collapse in the ex-Soviet satellites?

"No - impossible! Europe west of the Urals will fall into the West. Perhaps some states will fall into the paranoia belt, others into the East, but even if the United States doesn't succeed, Europe will pick up the threads."

Paranoia belt? East? At one point Brin quoted the term "evil empire" and mentioned how the USA had refrained from obliterating the enemy in 1946 — but he also emphasised that this would have had ominous effects and stressed his loathing for the Reagan/Thatcher ideology. He underlies the liberal individualisim which can be especially discerned in **The Postman**: "Jefferson said there should be a revolution every twenty years. I prefer to link it with sunspot cycles: the last great US revolution was 1968 which left everyone exhausted. I think we're due another one now."

Is he working to effect change with his writing? "If I could have been a really good scientist, I would have been. I *was* a teacher, and a good one. If you're a writer, you hope you're not just diverting. That's a worthy job, but it's not all there is to it. There are jobs to be done, participating in changes." **Earth** comes with an afterword, a reading list and some suggested organisations to join, from Greenpeace to Amnesty International.

However, what makes Brin's novels interesting is not propagandising for worthy causes, but the way he tackles moral questions of some complexity and ambiguity. In **The Postman**, the hero's taking on the mantle of a postal operative of a non-exsistant "Restored United States" 17 years after the Big One is on one level a scam, but on another the inspirational establishment of the one thing that can bring these battered communities through — a faith in something more than their isolation. It may be partly due to Krantz's guilt, but even so, heroism, responsibility and community arise out of his ambiguous motives. **Earth** — especially towards the end when we have almost incarnated god-figure based upon the Gaia "scientific myth" and the cyberpunk cliche of a vast data-net — builds upon this "convenient fiction." But isn't this faith built upon untruth?

"We're going to *need* heroes. I'm trying to show the strength of the Commons; we need community and the individual to take part in the foment of individual debate. We all have myths. Those people chose to believe because they needed to."

There's certainly a great deal in **The Postman** to suggest that Gordon Krantz's — followers? victims? — are not so much dupes but rather are *reminded* of the potential of their communities and selves. This is idealism rather than cynicism, as if deep down they are aware of the fiction but don't care. Whereas Orwell castigated this human foible as doublethink, Brin celebrates it as a model for reconciling competition and co-operation. In **Earth**, there's much discussion of the multiplicity of "selves" — both within the human mind with its contradictions and in the way the human race is viewed as — as it were — "thoughts" of a larger ecology: "Each of us is both many *and* one, all at the same time... E... Pluribus... Unum?" (pp 405/6) Brin cites this discussion when he returns to "tolerance". The human self is multi-levelled: "Look, the human brain consists of reptillian — mammallian — forebrain — different levels. This isn't the Asimovian opposition of lower self and godhood," he points out; our godhood can include our lower selves. If humanity's destiny is in some sort of apotheosis, it's into a godhood which reflects a multiplicity of viewpoints. It's perhaps this expansionist humanism which partly underlies Brin's involvement in the search for extra-terrestrial intelligence.

He gets in before me with a cliche about exobiology being the one hard science with no evidence for its subject matter. Following the publicity tour he will be attending the International Conference on Exobiology, which will discuss the search for planets, proto-evolution, higher levels of evolution and the activities of different SETI groups. He outlines the fundamental problems of SETI:

"Why *isn't* there any evidence so far of aliens? It comes down to two theories: the "bazooka" theory — someone got there first

and destroyed most of the others; or the "waterworld" theory — that the life-zone in our solar system goes out far beyond Mars, but Mars is too small to possess the essential water vapour. We are closer to the interior boundary of the life-zone than we thought; if Venus was in Mars' orbit, it would be well within the possible range of life, but we are exceptionally hot and dry, with — despite our oceans — more oxygen and less carbon dioxide and water than most such worlds. The usual life-bearing world would produce beings without fingers or the use of fire. Intelligent dolphins or squids, say."

So we'd come out of the sky to these creatures and give them a whole new universe. "We can be... *postmen*?"

Communication is obviously a major theme in Brin's work, with his information "Net" in **Earth** and the entire symbol of the "Postman", taking up the ideas of interpersonal communication, benign authority, co-operation, inspiration, social responsibility... He doesn't disagree, but is at pains to stress how he sees himself as a *popular* artist when I mention themes. "The myth of the suffering romantic artist is a good way to grab the girls but basically it's garbage." He prefers to address an everyday audience rather than the literary elite he claims British sf writes for. "Mark Twain is my role model. You read him as a child, and reading again as a 19 year old student thinking that you've just been given a 'children's book' you see so much that you think you must have had an abridged edition as a kid. You go back home on vacation to find your own copy and realise that you *hadn't*. Whereas Joyce deprived the world of more of his wonderful short stories and turned to **Ulysses** and **Finnegan's Wake** which only ten thousand people in the whole world have read. Okay, he was a genius and he wanted to extend the range of the novel, but..."

While not disagreeing, I try to think of an attack but with two literature degrees I haven't read either of Joyce's novels, so I change the subject back to sf. The references to other sf novels in **Earth**: Sheckley, Brunner (whose **Stand on Zanzibar** is name-checked twice in the Afterword), Gibson, whose books are an obvious source for Brin's "Net" ("But Gibson's version, if it existed, would be *insane*"). It's a matter of acknowledging sources for ideas, in the same way as *factual* ideas are acknowledged. While there's an obvious difference between Brunner's despair and Brin's reminder that there's a lot in modern society to be thankful for, he's careful to point out how anger and guilt can focus attention on a problem.

Given these references, and his admiration for Twain, is there a nod to **Tom Sawyer** when two characters, like Tom and Becky Thatcher, find themselves lost in a complicated cave-system? "Not... [pause] consciously." And how about another character's lament for the disappearance of his previous symbol, the daily postman? Another pause, and a smile. "What could I be refering to there?" It's as if he doesn't want to be thought of as *too* clever in a literary sense. "The theme throughout my novels is 'I'm just a fucking Cro-Magnon man doing the best I can'." But he works hard at his craft. Drafts of his novels are extensively circulated and note taken of the comments. Does he make major changes? "*No. I'm* the writer. The aim's not to make major changes, but to note where the reader puts the book down — to eat, sleep, feed the kids, make love. And I go back and *tighten* that scene."

Ah yes, the movie. Brin reels off a series of adjectives describing the screenplay. They are not complimentary.

And he's proud of the fact that **The Postman** was one of the recommended titles for young adults of the American Library Association, and of the letters he gets from readers. "You tend to disregard the letters saying 'Your book stopped me from committing suicide" because *another* book might tip them over the edge, but I did get, for instance, a letter from a woman in Florida who *was* a postal operative who told me that the book stopped her moping about a shitty job." He's prouder of the fact that the book is read in high school than that Warner Bros. are making a movie out of it.

Ah yes, the movie. Brin reels off a series of adjectives describing the screenplay. They are not complimentary.

"They'll have to trash it."

So will it happen?

"I have no idea. Except for the title, it's not like the book. They tell me that following the book would be 'too expensive'. The action scenes in the book feature two or three people. In the screenplay they have the wreckage of downtown San Francisco to construct — and they say the book's too expensive."

What's next? Another "Uplift" book is due for 1992. "I refuse to write two same-universe books in a row. It makes you lazy. I have other things to say."

Looking for Brin *behind* his deservedly well-regarded sf, he comes across as something of the evangelist, more of the teacher. Several times in the middle of an opinionated discussion, he would back off by admitting the speculative nature of his ideas, or referring to the size of his ego. There are writers of his kind of sf who have fossilised into the role of guru. But if sf has any role at all outside stuffing wallets it is as a vehicle of iconoclastic ideas. Brin's model of a multi-consciousness within and including ourselves may be confusing but it does offer a way of dealing with the logical contradictions of some of his stances. Picking and choosing in the ideological supermarket? Maybe, but it emphasises that any ideology is full of contradictions. His definition of the current mind-sets which dominate the world were followed by more qualifications than I've directly indicated.

David Brin's fiction is marked by an intelligence and social concern which makes it stand out. He is particularly good at sf's genre-strength: the speculative short story which shows well-drawn characters in a future into which we can see the scientific and moral complexities of our own world developing. In a genre plagued by nihilism or facile acceptance of "It'll all work out", Brin's optimism does have a thoughtful core to it. We may get there in the end, but we'll have to work hard at it. "We have defeated paranoia," suggests Brin: "The next to go will be machismo" — which is something barely touched upon in **Earth**, although he is working on something with the title **The Council of Woman**. It's not so much that words like "optimism" or "sentimentality" are inappropriate adjectives but they are *incomplete*: valid parts of the human mind.

Brin describes himself as "not an atheist: not an agnostic", but he nevertheless believes that we must act if "we are doing this on our own." "This" involves cleaning up the planet, reforming institutions — and moving into space. Sf is entertainment, but also an inspirational tool by which these goals can be striven towards.

Early on in the conversation, he made a statement to the effect that "Intolerance should be stamped on," and waited for my reaction. "You laugh, but that's the point; that in our culture we *can* laugh at such a statement."

I find myself disagreeing with some of his ensuing remarks. But I *do* like that.

I like his sf, too.

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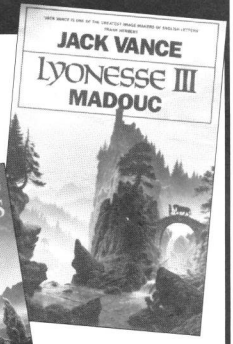

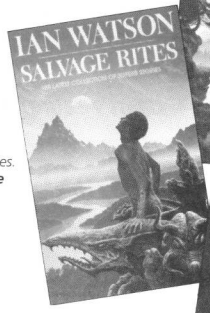

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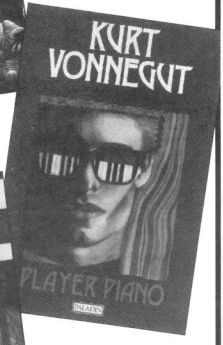

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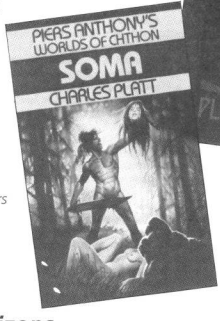

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Science Fiction and the Uninformed Heart

Steve Palmer

Bruno Bettelheim, the great psychoanalyst, child psychologist and writer died in March 1990, apparently by his own hand. In 1960 he published **The Informed Heart**, a book inspired by the year he spent in the concentration camps of Dachau and Buchenwald, and which sought to understand how people reacted when in extreme situations.

His remarks on science fiction appear in a chapter devoted to the effect of a dehumanised, technological environment on people. For Bettelheim, this was characterised in his era by factories, capitalist-style mass consumerism, the concentration camps, and the general air of mechanisation.

The section was called "Machine Gods" and was based on the observation that, in society as it has been and is now, people tend to glorify or project what is important, or what they see most clearly, in themselves. In sf, "the prefabricated daydreams of a technological age," Bettelheim saw that people were simultaneously haunted by and dependent upon machines; that they were setting up technology as a thing above people, not as a servant of people. Technology was becoming a god.

Early peoples tended to extract the essential quality of phenomena and deify them; thus all the early pantheons consisted of many gods each with some small area of influence or control. There is evidence that, although matriarchal religions of the Neolithic period were not universal, they were influential, presenting a view of the universe in which the female was most important, often deified in three incarnations: the young woman, the great mother, and the old woman. This reflected the viewpoint of Neolithic society. The earliest patriarchal religions were projections of various societies — the Sumerian, the Egyptian, the Assyrian, the Hittite, the Semitic — into a cosmic order. So there came gods of agriculture, war, cities, order, and so on. About three thousand years ago a further refinement, mirroring the advance of society, was the introduction of a lone, abstracted god — Yahweh, Allah — and the appearance of various humanist principles such as human equality.

Now, in the Twentieth century, paralleling the demise of patriarchal religion, a new god has taken the place of the old. This is technology; the abstracted projection of people's inner selves, of their isolated, unemotional intellects, of their obsession with time, efficiency, money and order, and of their dehumanised psyches. Bettelheim wrote (quoting another source):

> If we look at science fiction in this perspective, we find it concentrating on "problems of space and time; the individual's sense of reality and identity; problems of prolonged isolation and individual existence in mortal combat with machines."
>
> Bruno Bettelheim
> **The Informed Heart**, Penguin, 1960

Science fiction has provided an admirable mirror to the minds of men (for in the period Bettelheim was referring to there was a preponderance of male sf writers), describing imaginary machine foes, future worlds characterised by all-encompassing clockwork perfection, gleaming metallic cities. These images were new imaginary Heavens, both desired and feared by men, who as they devised them knew they were within the realms of possibility.

This new god has become something of a monster. Being a creature of men's unemotional minds it knows no natural limits; the extraordinary pace of advance and the headlong production of new things testifies to the expansion of this new god, its lack of human limits, and its ability to transcend the role of a means to become an end which Brian Aldiss described as "... a new sovereignty that may prove more deadly than the last."

In recent times, computers have become the face of the god; in William Gibson's trilogy, his paean to surfaces, people are manipulated by artificial intellegences — disembodied brains so slippery they can never really be found, nor understood, and who exist in a world so dehumanised thay can only be indicated, never touched.

The computer is seen as omnipotent; in a similar manner to people's consideration of money, computers are visualised as saviours. It is imagined that if only there could be more and better computers the world's problems would reduce. The so-called developing nations are sold technology which is so above what they know it causes worse problems than those it was sent to mitigate; the computers and modern machines stand idle because there is no organisation, education, finance, or support for them.

Science fiction and technology came simultaneously from minds regressed beyond their earlier infantile levels to an almost foetal world of greed, a world in which all needs were provided for by some gigantic external entity, and the problem with identity was solved not by drawing on inner human resources but by taking in characteristics of that entity.

These phenomena, most apparent between the thirties and fifties, are now more subtle, appearing for example as a sudden rash of cyborg films (cyborgs taking their qualities from machines and men with hypertrophied muscles — you never get a weedy cyborg, do you?). By and large, films have opted for one of two possibilities with their machine-humans; either macho cyborgs who kill if you sneeze in their general direction, or infant robots smothered in sentimentality. Both are projections of the modern male mind — largely infantile, largely narcissistic, and lacking identity. Bettelheim wrote:

> It seems that if we project our wishful and anxious fantasies not on manlike objects but on complex machinery we run the risk of losing our psychological identity as man.
>
> Bettelheim, **The Informed Heart**

In parallel with these thoughts, Bettelheim noted that as writers described the extreme

outposts of technological advance, they were also haunted by the destructive power of their creations. Mirroring the increasing destructiveness of machines through the twentieth century, from guns to tanks to planes and bombs to nuclear weapons, came a realisation in sf of the possibilities of global holocaust. Some writers gleefully pounced on this possibility, and some still do, blithely zapping the world in order to bring in their own version of humanity; others described them, but kept their upper lips stiff. Both types remain alienated. Isaac Asimov wrote:

> I suppose that science fiction writers and readers were, on the whole, pleased [about Hiroshima] — if not at the effect of the atom bomb itself, then at least at the crystallisation into fact of something that had been so science fictional.
>
> Isaac Asimov
> **Nightfall One**, Panther, 1971

The other main theme taken by Bettelheim in his piece is that of dehumanisation. He saw in science fiction three symptoms: dehumanisation by name, by disregard for the body or its absence, and by the absence of intimate human relations.

In Asimov's story "Nightfall", characters were given the names Aton 77, Theremon 762, Beenay 25, Sheerin 501, Genovi 41, Sor 5, Faro 24, Yimot 70, Latimer 25, Vendret 2. All these are men. Each name is interchangeable with, for example, R2D2 and C3PO; when reading the story, I wondered if there would be any difference if the actual character of, say, Theremon 762 was switched for C3PO. People become androids and vice versa.

This early use of depersonalised names was a symbol of the disregard science fiction had, and still has to some extent, for real human beings. It helps explain the attitude Literature has to science fiction. For writers such as Asimov, Aton 77 and his associates were not experienced as real people, but as husks; the absence of inner humanity was symbolised by the absence of human names. Similarly, the use of surname only, not limited to sf, indicates alienation from characters; thus Bruce Sterling's Abelard Lindsay is called Lindsay, while Gibson's hero in **Neuromancer** is Case.

Even when the more blatant name-forms had died out, science fiction was for a long time unable to transcend a small number of stereotypes which were similarly husk-like: the masculine astronaut hero, the scientist (and his beautiful daughter), the hard-nosed military man, the foreign baddie, and so on.

The distortion or absence of the human body is one of sf's most popular themes, one rarely touched upon by literature or other genres (except fantasy). In psychological circles, fantasies, obsessions or nightmares about changes in the shape or size of the body are most often interprtted as implying identity problems; it is perhaps no coincidence that the future excursions undertaken by so many sf writers happen in and around strange bodies. The lack of identity felt by so many people, particularly men, is exressed in their assumption either of stereotyped or non-human shapes.

Thus the future worlds of the cyberpunks are filled with people altered by biotechnology; the bizarre fauna of Bruce sterling's **Schismatrix** for example. The cyborg or genetically altered human being is a stock idea of sf. Even Stableford and Langford's future history **The Third Millenium** is packed with human transformation.

The depleted human identities of these writers, combined with prevailing patriarchy and the onset of technology, gave rise to eulogies of the naked intellect which passed the boundaries of the merely silly. The imaginations of these writers worked in such a way that

No machine, nor any machine made into a deity, can have compassion for, nor even interest in, mere human beings.

"... most of the heroes are basically minds without a body."

Patriarchy suppressed emotion, but technology actually killed it; thus the unemotional intellect was free to roam terrains dehumanised to the level of the machine. Before the seventies men were forced to suppress emotion, a simutaneous tenet, rooted in Greek society, glorifying the rational intellect and eventually bringing applied science and the fiction that accompanied it. The result was depictions of the isolated, unemotional intellect which, from a suitable distance, could not be distinguished from the typical computer.

This, the ultimate stripping of humanity from its own brains, is described by Bruce Sterling in **Schismatrix** as making human feeling too mild to notice; one of his characters, with a new consciousness of cold, pragmtic logic, experiences humanity as a buried subconsciousness. The author who confesses to being a gadget freak writes about gadgets, though many seemed once to have been people.

Bettelheim's third point, sf's disregard for intimate human relationships, follows on from his previous arguments. The semi-machines in their world dominated by machine gods have nothing inside their human-shaped shells, but could not come close to one another even if they had. No machine, nor any machine made into a deity, can have compassion for, nor even interest in, mere human beings. The size of technology and the immense vistas conjured up by sf, while a measure of people's imaginations, are more a measure of their inability to find themselves and others in an automated world; theoretically, there is no limit to a mechanical world, and men have not yet understood that human beings are small.

Some modern sf is changing, however. The appearance of women writers, and the somewhat reluctant move towards three-dimensional characters by men writers, mirrors the change in attitude of men and women to one another; but the attitude to technology has remained much the same. For eaxmple, the fear of humanity's end as a biological entity has changed from one entailing machine domination to one entailing domination by biology fashioned by machines roughly in their own image.

Society, however, lags behind the individual vision. In America, military men now let some software take decisions for them. For some reason such software is called an "expert system". Other groups are trying to mimic the brain by building "neural networks" which will apparently provide even more wonders. The existence of technology as an end in itself could be a fatal problem, and sf does harm by tending to perpetuate the myth that what people have made and could make must be good and right.

The most realistic image of what can be done in the real world has come with EF Schumacher's vision of Intermediate Technology. It would be wonderful to see some science fictional depictions of future Intermediate Technology. However, I suspect that we are doomed for some time yet to endure, and perhaps eventually worship, the new machine gods; could Gwyneth Jones' VENTURan embrace ever become real?

To conclude in Bettelheim's own words:

> It can be shown that the influencing machine, too, began as a projection of the human body, but the essential point is that it does not retain this image; it becomes ever more complex and the psychotic person ends up feeling controlled by mechanical devices that no longer resemble anything human or even animal-like. Thus modern man, when he is haunted, whether sane or profoundly disturbed, is no longer haunted by other men or by grandiose projections of man, but by machines.
>
> Bettelheim, **The Informed Heart**

Bruno Bettelheim: Recollections and Reflections, the psychologist's memoirs, is published by Thames and Hudson, £14.95

Book Reviews

Edited by Paul Kincaid

Nightfall

Isaac Asimov and Robert Silverberg
Gollancz, 1990, 352pp, £13.95

In 1941 John W Campbell gave a quotation by Ralph Waldo Emerson to Isaac Asimov, who inspired by it, wrote "Nightfall". It describes a planet with six suns which never knows darkness until one fateful day. With Robert Silverberg as his collaborator that story has been expanded into this novel. That is: the first two thirds of the novel are based on the story, the last section which describes life after the catastrophe is new.

What has been added to expand from 40 pages to 3507 First, a section describing the original archaeological work which confirms that society is destroyed by fire every 2049 years. Second, the background to the mathematics which throws the theory of universal gravitation into doubt and leads the astronomers to think that the eclipse is approaching as the 2049 year cycle nears its close. Third, the introduction of a bit of xeno-psychology which explains how a whole planet can be driven mad by Darkness. And fourth, the role of the religious cult who know from their Book of Revelations that the end is nigh.

These constitute the first two sections of the novel, and end with the original story's last line: "The long night had come again". However, the night is not absolute, and the whole tone of the novel is much lighter and more optimistic than the short story. In the last third, "Daybreak", nearly all of the main characters have survived with their senses intact; they also tend to survive the barbarism into which society has collapsed. The short story implied that the situation was much worse.

The names of some characters have changed, the six suns now have names instead of Greek letters as their identifiers, the role of the cult is changed, and the lead roles are now taken by minor characters from the story. There are one or two other small changes which seemed to have little point — for instance, the original game of "multichess" has become "stochastic chess". And what is still missing is a good description of what the different suns look like and their positions in the sky.

With little difference in quality between the two, a lot of people who liked the story may find they enjoy the novel.

LJ Hurst

Ratspike

John Blanche & Ian Miller
GW Books, 1990, £12.99

Blood and Iron

Les Edwards
GW Books, 1990, 98pp, £12.99

By all means judge these books by their covers: they are by the illustrators represented therein. Also judge them by the cover price. Are they worth it?

No.

Les Edwards gets an "art book"all to himself. Lucky him. Not sure about us, though. He has covered Horror, Fantasy and sf; and in **Blood and Iron** there is a representative from all. He has technical skill *ad infinitum*, a good colour sense, and photo-realistic painting down as pat as Jim Burns and Chris Foss. Unfortunately, somewhere along the line (before he started painting book covers) his brain got disengaged from his painting hand, so all we have are Horror, Fantasy and sf cliches depicted in a way which leaves as little to the imagination as hardcore pornography. These cliched images no doubt sell "the product" very well, but books are more than product and book covers are more than adverts, so **Blood and Iron** really didn't appeal to me at all.

In complete contrast is Ian Miller. His artwork is executed in inks and is evocative, eerie and very, very sharp. You'll have to see his work to understand that last comment, but don't look at it in **Ratspike** because most of the evocative, eerie etc quality is lost in a welter of what I assume is meant to be sexy designing — heavy black borders, black ink splodges, inset artwork, and bizarre comments (viz: "Bring me his testicles!")

John Blanche is terribly unfortunate in having to share **Ratspike** with Miller as Blanche obviously sees Miller as something of an inspiration; but equally obviously he can't Miller like Miller can, so he suffers rather in comparison. Also, he suffers from a penchant for Games Workshop-type imagery, which is an area of cliche even Les Edwards avoids like the plague.

In short, Ian Miller says his own things in his own way in places much better than **Ratspike**, and both Les Edwards and John Blanche have an unbecoming obsession with cliche and are best avoided until they magically cure themselves by putting their brains in touch with their hands.

Richard Middleton

Earth

David Brin
Macdonald, 1990, 601pp, £13.95

This is David Brin's blockbuster, the novel designed to set him up there in the bestseller lists, his answer to the likes of **Eon**. I use the term "designed" advisedly. During the long gestation of **Earth**, Brin has consulted many people about its content and structure (even I was sent a copy of a late draft on disk to read critically), and he has taken on board a wealth of advice and criticism. It is hard to imagine a more thoroughly researched book.

The seemingly inevitable adjunct to this approach is that there is usually some loss of inspiration, a tendency for the product to come out looking, like the camel, as if parts of it have been assembled by a committee. It is to Brin's credit that he largely avoids this, and has produced a story that is very readable in parts, although a bit indigestible to swallow at one sitting.

The basic storyline is as strong as anything Brin has done: a complex singularity (nothing so simple as a black hole for Brin) has fallen into the Earth's core and is eating away at the planet. What is it? Who made it? How will they get it out? Scope there for a good short novel. But this book is set about 50 years in the future (just about the most diffi-

cult time to set any story), and takes on board the entire saga of eco-doom in as realistic a way as possible.

As the title implies, **Earth** is about the fate of the entire planet — it might just as well have been called "Gaia". There are scenes set here, there and (nearly) everywhere over the surface of the planet, and a role call of characters which certainly breaks the rule I was given (by a certain Dr D Brin) when starting out to write fiction: no more than six, or the readers lose track. There are also tricksy effects that I dislike. Brin started using a Mac II while writing **Earth**, and has gone overboard with different typefaces and computer graphics. He has also managed, by including an Afterword, a "bonus" short story (crap) and acknowledgements to get the page count up to exactly 600. *Come on*, David, for Chrissakes. Who needs it?

But having picked the nits, I can come clean and admit that I like the book. There's still too much to take in, even after reading it once on screen and once in proof; I'll be glad to see a finished copy for the third reading. There's hard sf as good as anything being done at the moment, there's the eco-thriller element, there's new religions, there's even "freon" as a swearword. I *hate* blockbusters, couldn't stand **Eternity**, loathed **Stark** and vowed never to read another eco-novel. But I love this one.

John Gribbin

The Folk of the Fringe

Orson Scott Card

Legend, 1990, 243pp, £11.95hb, £5.95pb

This is a linked collection of five short stories set in the collapse after World War III, describing how the values of a Mormon society are helping to rebuild something of America in the mid-west.

Three things stand out about these stories: First: as a vision of the holocaust they are not very different from, say, Brin's **The Postman** or Stanwick's **In the Drift**, and much before. Second: they are about a mixed society — of believers and non-believers, so that we only see Mormonism from the outside. And third, most of the non-believers' discoveries of the nature of Mormon faith come as something of an anticlimax or disappointment. For instance, Salt Lake City has been flooded and the Temple lies in the middle of a lake; some gentiles decide to raid the temple for its hidden treasure left before the flood. Avoiding the guards, they dive and bring up sheets of metal; but these are not plates of gold, but old cans pressed flat with interssions written on them — "Dear Lord heal my girl Jenny please I pray". The ability to intercede the God is obviously important to the Mormons but it is different for an non-believer. Apparently He does not answer very often, if at all.

This third point raises a critical problem: should I ask whether Card intended his readers to feel the values of Mormonism? And should I answer that question? For if the answer were No, it would make this book no more than an interesting sidelight on the holocaust in sf.

LJ Hurst

Moonheart

Charles de Lint

Pan, 1990, 485pp, £13.95, £7.99pb

This book is like a dubiously built ornithopter that nonetheless flies. Its characters function more as plot-propulsion devices than psychologically solid people; its dialogue sometimes veers down into stiff, stale cliche; and its display of "fantasy products" such as a Ring of Power, names peppered with apostrophes like Ak'is'hyr and Ur'wen'ta, and the discovery of Inner Power and Secret Destiny, all seem shopworn. But despite all this, the novel held my attention consistently and enjoyably.

Thomas Hengwr is wanted. The Canadian Parapsychology Branch want to research upon him. Kieran Fog, his apprentice in the "The Way" which provides the book's "Magic", is looking for him. Jamie Tamson, a wealthy literary philanthropist who owns Tamson House in Ottowa (where all the various sub-plots eventually collide), wants him

Artwork by Kevin A Cullen

to explain the disappearance of his niece, Sara Kendell. And Sara Kendell wants him to explain the use and purpose of a bag of strange artifacts found in her junk-shop. In the book's "Otherworld" of sixth-century North America he is wanted by Taliesin, a bard exiled from Gwynedd by Hengwr, and by the tribes of that continent to assist in combating the evil Mal'ek'a whose true identity is nameless. The narrative moves between the two worlds, and Tamson House (a mysterious "good" Amityville with an entity of its own) straddles the two times. There is a retinue of minor characters from two cultures, including manitou (elves), Indian squaws and sorcerors, hit men, a streetwise no-shit copper with marital problems, his wife, a biker called Blue, and dozens of evil tragg'a (orcs, basically) who provide the blood and gore.

Two things elevate the novel above mediocrity. The first is the narrative technique — events are seen through the eyes of a range of characters at different times in different ways (from the two different worlds) which gives the book's "universe", characters and plot a certain depth, width and breadth that would otherwise be absent. The second is its philosophy of good and evil: for much of the novel the reader is challenged to judge whether Taliesin or Thomas Hengwr is the malevolent power, a problem shared by many of the characters. The solution to this central problem is that Thomas Hengwr has been, unknown to himself, Jekylled and Hyded into a Gandalf and a Sauron — Mal'ek'a — who manifests himself for a final battle in Tamson House, by this time transported to the Otherworld lock stock and character. Like Ged from Leguin's "Earthsea", victory over evil can only be achieved by the reunification with good. Its an old theme interestingly handled, in a novel that gets airborne despite its excess weight.

David Mitchell

The Gothic Tales of the Marquis de Sade

Marquis de Sade
(tr. Margaret Crosland)
Peter Owen, 1990, 183pp, £12.95

The name that comes to mind with this collection isn't primarily de Sade but de Laclos, and for more reason than one of the heroines is a Mademoiselle de Tourville/Tourvel, and one of the minor villains called Valmont. The stories are bawdy; some humorous, some pretending to a high Gothic — if not actually camp — tragedy. The reader will look in vain for the genital-by-genital descriptions of multiple sex found in **Justine** or **100 Days of Sodom**; for the delight in cruelty, the bloodshed, tortures and mutilations which give sadism its dictionary definition.

Although atypical in that sense, these late stories showcase the contradictions in de Sade's fiction. If he is a libertine, where does one put the apparently-straight moralising? If a moralist, how account for the ironies of vice? In "Eugene de Franval" incest is punished by a last-minute multiple catastrophe, but not before the father-daughter relationship has come to seem the most desirable one in the story. "Florville and Courval" telegraphs the working-out of its interlocked crimes, but contains a most instructive comparison of deathbeds: a religious woman dies in terror, a woman of the world in peace; the one regretting the good she has failed to do, the other amusing herself by letting her heirs gamble for her effects — she has, after all, only lost the years in which a woman ceases to be desirable.

Whether de Sade is a misogynist is an argument for another book. In **Gothic Tales** there are women victims, but there is everything to suggest that that is because they exist in 18th century French society. Some of the stories here are only anecdotes — "The Chastised Husband" and "Room for Two" — and it is in these short works that men are disadvantaged, humiliated or merely acquiescent to women's desires. The novellas — "Eugenie de Franval", "Florville and Courval", "Emilie de Tourville" — show women as men's victims, or sometimes as Fate's victims; but always as a result of their gender. Either their passions or their power to give life betrays them.

Like **Les Liasons Dangereuses**, these stories have the air of the Age of Reason: brutal, cynical, manipulative, and betrayed (always betrayed) by moments of unaffected feeling. The loss of any control leads to disaster. Which may of course be why the age gives rise to sadism, a practise in which control is the essential factor.

Mary Gentle

The Lost Years

JM Dillard
Simon & Schuster, 1990, 307pp, £12.95

The title refers to the gap between Star Trek's original five year mission and the events of the first film, but this novel covers only about a year (two further novels are planned to continue the sequence). It is excessively self-indulgent: there's a failed attempt to give the Tarot a rational respectability, and a number of awkward references to the original series and the films. Dillard treats the crew's farewells with the kind of mawkish reverence which marred the films, and takes 100 pages to set up the mind-numbingly simple plot, introducing a selection of minor characters one *hopes* will be taken up in future novels because they make little sense here.

The story lacks momentum. Sarek (Spock's father) and Uhura are kidnapped by the Djanai. Kirk and his immediate superior and love-interest, Ciana, negotiate for their release while acting as diplomats between the Djanai and the Inari, whose differences the Romulans have exploited. Meanwhile, McCoy and *his* love-interest, Keridwen, join Spock and his fiancee on Vulcan (hardly an original development for Dillard, who wrote the novelisation of **Star Trek V**) who purloins the Vulcan equivalent of a magician's spirit for the Romulans, thus bashing the story into an ill-fitting dovetail.

The novel appears to be like the cover, a very dull rough draft.

Terry Broome

Sorcerer's Son

Phyllis Eisenstein
Grafton, 1990, 379pp, £12.95, £7.95 pb

This novel began with ominous signs that it was merely another magical fantasy. A well written one perhaps, the fluency of the author and her control over language were quickly apparent, but it was less clear whether she had the imagination to equal them. However, as the book progressed it demonstrated a pleasingly independent line of thought which I suppose one should expect but which one doesn't always get from Nebula award nominees.

It begins when a sorceror, Smada Rezhyk, proposes marriage to another sorceror, Delivev Ormolu. Rejected, he fears that she might attack him, and decides to get her pregnant, so limiting her powers while he strengthens his defenses. An ensnared fire demon, Gildrum, is given the form of a handsome young knight, Mellor, and gains entry to Delivev's castle and bed. A boy, Cray, is born who is taught that his father went to continue his mission and never returned. As he grows up, Cray wishes passionately to be like his never-seen father, and to discover what became of him. Cray's quest for his non-existent father, and the events which rise from that, is the main narrative of the novel.

None of this may strike you as being very original, indeed the plot isn't. The originality lies, and perhaps this is the vital place for originality in a quest fantasy, in the world created. Rezhyk enslaves fire demons by means of rings which hold their names and thus give him power over them. Delivev has power as a weaver, controlling spiders, snakes, plants, living creatures. But where Delivev is kind and loving, Rezhyk is a cold intellect whose aims are knowledge and the power that such knowledge can give him. The worlds of the demons of fire, water, air and ice are convincingly realised, even when sketched in lightly, as are the characters, so the reader does have an interest in their eventual fate, caring what becomes of them.

This is a well written, well conceived book, certainly more than just another fantasy. It is not for arachnophobes, though, the number of spiders would make you blench!

Helen McNabb

Double Helix Fall

Neil Ferguson
Abacus, 1990, 272pp, £3.99

Set in San Francisco in 2023, a generation after the Great Quake, this is a **Brave**

New World-like dystopia where social status is determined before birth, the population is kept quiet with continual TV soaps, and gangs of stateless outcasts - the Zappers - play cat-and-mouse with the police in their aircraft.

Double Helix Fall tells of the few citizens of this society who are not what they seem: Sollyheim, the ancient originator of genetic engineering, escaping from his luxury prison cell; Annie Bernier, the President's daughter, who heads for the hills to join the Zappers; Rick Stator, robot private eye who believes himself to be human and is on Bernier's trail; Benny Cznetsov, murderous police chief prepared to do anything to preserve the *status quo*; and Spight, tramp with a dialogue consisting of Captain Beefheart quotes.

And everyone is officially dead. At the moment of birth the individual's entire life is already mapped out, so it is incapable of evolution; therefore dead. This turns out to be part of the paranoid delusion behind Cznetsov's desire for power. The whole of society revolves around the systematic denial of life, symbolised by the Double Helix Fall manoeuvre performed by the Zappers in their power-kites. The Zappers consider themselves alive, though officially non-existent; the vast majority of the people believe themselves dead, though really alive; Sollyheim is thought dead in the oldfashioned sense and turns up inconveniently; Rick Stator seems human but started life in a laboratory.

This attempt to define life as the contrary of death, rather than of artificiality, is reminiscent of much of Philip K. Dick's work. Ferguson's androids not only dream, they love. Stator comes to accept his humanity at the same moment that it is denied him; he has to accept that he knows the name of his creator and that the creator has failed in its mission to destroy its creation. As in **Frankenstein**, the Monster is far the less monstrous.

Compared with other work by Ferguson, **Double Helix Fall** is a little restrained. This is less a reflection on the book itself, as on what sf in the 1990s is trying to be about. This is a competent sf novel though, which is enough.

Christopher Amies

The Stand

Stephen King

Hodder and Stoughton, 1990, 1007pp, £14.95

Somewhere in California, a biological warfare laboratory has a spill, then a security breakdown. A man escapes, takes his family and flees across country. Before he dies, he infects enough people with the superflu virus that he carries to start an epidemic that wipes out the greater part of the population of the USA (and presumably the World). From this beginning, Stephen King builds an epic novel which moves from the horror of biological warfare to a nightmare, in which the forces of Good and Evil struggle for the survivors of the plague.

The Stand was first published in 1979. Like many novels it went through a metamorphosis from "a manuscript of over twelve hundred pages long and weighing twelve pounds, the same weight as the sort of bowling ball I favour" **(Danse Macabre)** to some four hundred pages shorter. In the introduction to the new version. King explains:

> The cuts were made at the behest of the accounting department. They toted up production costs, laid these next to the sales of my previous four books and decided that a cover price of $6.95 was about what the market would bear.

Now, in response to readers who have heard this story, King has restored some parts, re-written others and generally updated **The Stand.**

The plot remains the same, it doesn't take any new twists, but it takes longer to get where it's going, it takes the scenic route. The bulk of the re-writing addes texture and detail. Other parts add characters and situations to flesh out areas where events seemed to hurry along just a little too quickly and easily in the 1979 version. These changes have made a good book into a better one. **The Stand** is sf by any definition you care to apply, and is a fine example of the kind of writing that separates King from the horde of his imitators.

Jon Wallace

The Bad Place

Dean R Koontz

Headline, 1990, 372pp, £12.95

The Night of the Moonbow

Thomas Tryon

Hodder, 1990, 320pp, £13.95

Two books which inhabit that curious world betwixt horror and fantasy, neither of which strives for polished effect. Tryon's is by far the more readable. Set in a 1930s Summer Camp in the USA, and working in overtones of antisemitism and the dangers of (over) organised religion against a backdrop of youthful innocence passing into the awkwardness and reality of adolescence, it's almost a **Lord of the Flies** for Middle America. Only here adults exist and are portrayed as uncaring figureheads, whilst the teenage boys do their utmost to get rid of the new Camper in some fairly evil-minded ways.

The novel flows effortlessly, characters are well-rounded, but ultimately there isn't very much there. What is clever about it, though, is the realistic relationships between the boys, their foibles, loyalties, the dated codes of honour, camp rituals and slang-phrases; the reader certainly feels part of the camp, and for that, empathises with the often persecuted Leo Joachim. The elements of fantasy belong more to the realms of secret societies, protomasonic rituals, rather than any overt fantastical events, and it is this which disappoints. Nevertheless, worth your attention.

The Koontz novel, on the other hand, suffers far more from structure and lack of narrative flow, than it does from any evil intent. Pushed very much as a best seller a la Stephen King, the average chapter length is something less than four pages - and even then, some are sub-divided further. This produces a constant chopping from one narrative strand to another, and whilst (if handled carefully) it can be a useful device to develop a plot, all it does here is to drown the reader in confusion. The "Bad Place" seems to be all in the mind of Frank Pollard, an apparent drifter who awakes on the street suffering from amnesia. The story unravels as he approaches a Private Eye to find out who he is, and it seems that murder is never far away. The characters are flat, stereotypical ciphers, rather than people with whom you can feel sympathy. I found the writing hurried and simplistic and was astounded at the **Los Angeles Daily News** verdict, "has a wider imagination than Stephen King, he also writes a better sentence". One to miss, I'm afraid.

Alan Dorey

The Blood of Roses

Tanith Lee

Legend, 1990, 678pp, L14.99

Authors who write books that are utterly excessive in length should be prosecuted by the Royal Society for the Protection of Trees or some similarly august body. Ms Lee is a prime candidate.

The story is set in a typically oppressive Lee universe - medieval somewhen and a Central/Northern European somewhere. The central idea is interesting, the Christian Eucharist subverted into a celebration of vampirism. Anjelen, a would-be sacrifice to the Tree deity rescued by the Church Paternal, exploits the opportunities offered by a priest's training to undermine that institution; he is also the embodiment of the older pagan religion struggling for survival. To gain his revenge, he creates people in his own image. His second attempt, Anillia, gives birth to Mechail, and both challenge Anjelen's control by creating others and ultimately by seeking to return to the Tree. Meanwhile the Christerium first expands, with decadently decorated new buildings, then crumbles into decay as the real nature of the Knights of God are exposed.

The biblical parallels were clear first time around; it was unnecessary to retell the story in detail from each main character's point of view. The image of the man becoming one with the tree/cross as Christianity is distorted by the older religion, recurs frequently and is neatly reflected in the peasant custom of worshipping in front of the Tree when there is no priest around. The main characters seem to be ciphers, perhaps deliberately as some of the incidental characters, such as the Administress or Veksa, are credible people. The chronology is confused so that the expected climax, the revelation to the world of what is

going on in the Christerium, is suddenly dismissed as having happened a couple of centuries earlier.

This is a rambling, self-indulgent novel which might, with some creative editing, make a readable short story. In its present form it should be pulped and recycled.

Valerie Housden

Buffalo Gals

Ursula LeGuin

Gollancz, 1990, 196pp, £13.95

LeGuin calls this a book of "stories and poems about animals." It would be easy to dismiss such a volume as pretentious — her attempt to find common cause with the sensibilities of the (economically powerful) American New Agers) — but this is far from being the case. It is about man's perception of the life forms with which he shares (and might potentially share) this and other planets.

LeGuin argues that we are now unreceptive to the voices of animals and the planet herself. "By climbing up into his own head and shutting out every voice but his own, 'Civilised Man' has gone deaf." The stories explore this topic from disconcertingly novel perspectives.

Some of the stories do what the best writing should do: make the reader look at the world (or some facet of it) in a new way. The powerful title story sees animals as would a child, without the carapace of adult preconception. In "Direction Of The Road", a tree tells us in the tones of a resentful employee what it has been like to do a tree's job by the roadside in the days of accelerated travel.

The directness with which LeGuin approaches the alien idea (as in **The Left Hand of Darkness**) makes it seem habitual. She places it with consummate skill in its own milieu in a way which promotes instant acceptance; a lesser writer would succumb to the need for preceding explanation. An example is "The Author of the Acacia Seeds", when the reader is a considerable way into the story before realising that yes, they are reading a story about the written literature of ants. The suspension of disbelief is utterly effortless, as she goes on to develop further the examples of therolinguistics: the study of wild animal communication.

As for the poetry: because so little verse reaches the mass market I feel very awkward about being in the slightest derogatory about poetry which has a good chance of doing just this. At the heart of the best poetry there is an irreducible, metaverbal core of truth. "What is going on in the oaks around the barn" comes closest to it, but the real function of the poetry here is to throw into higher relief the poetic nature of the prose, and any attempt to find the kernel of the poetry fails because after the words have done their work (albeit skilfully), not enough remains.

When I came out of a Picasso exhibition recently, it seemed for a full half- hour that everyone I saw had a face composed of triangles. **Buffalo Gals** could make the reader look at the neighbourhood moggy in a similarly re- defined manner: that is, until we "climb up into our own head" again.

Michael Fearn

The Land of Eternal Fire

TP Newark

Muller, 1990, 232pp, £11.95

This is a well-researched historical fantasy set in Fifth Century Armenia and Constantinople. Newark's first book, **Medieval Warfare**, was published while he was still at school; since then he has published no less than eight non- fiction books ranging in subject from Celtic warriors to the American West. This is his first novel, and it bodes well for the future. The Roman Empire has almost completely fallen, only the Byzantine splinter survives; the Huns discover that the Romans of Constantinople have suborned some Armenian alchemists whose powers include generating incredibly powerful flame- throwers, flinging out all-consuming Greek Fire. The Hun Edeco's mission is to capture the secret of the flame-thrower, accompanied by the Greek chronicler, Orestes, who must write down all Edeco's adventures for posterity.

Most of the major characters existed; where the fantasy comes in is with the inclusion of a flame-thrower 200 years earlier than recorded, and a dragon figures in the tale, to generate the myth of St George no less. For the rest, the book seems solidly founded in reality, a harsh reality where the riches of Constantinople compare unfavourably with the poverty surrounding that city; where life is cheap and bravery common-place; where humour shines out to relieve the boredom, the bleak lives and misery.

The two heroes cross the Black Sea, the Caucasian Mountains, the Caspian Sea, in their search for the Eternal Fire. As with all good quests, lives are changed as a result: Orestes discovers he too can be a hero, though not of heroic stature; his wit, guile and brains ensure it. I suspect it is Orestes who will feature in forthcoming adventures in the Falling Empires Cycle; it might prove interesting to see where the cycle leads him.

An interesting quest novel, with a few spectacular or wondrous ingredients, and enough historical detail, which promises more for the future. Not outstanding, but worth reading; a pleasant change from the countless other overly precious fantasy trilogies!

Nik Morton

The Barsoom Project

Larry Niven & Steven Barnes

Pan, 1990, 340pp, £13.95, £7.95 pb

Niven and Barnes have returned to the characters and situations first introduced in **Dream Park** seven years ago.

Dream Park is "a state-of-the-art amusement arena" where gamers can role-play for real — without getting hurt. It's all done with mirrors, or rather with actors, holograms, subsonics, hypnotics and special effects. This time the game is not just for fun — it's a Fat Ripper, designed to instil in its chubby players a new attitude towards food. This particular Fat Ripper is the Fimbulwinter Game; confusingly this Norse word is used to describe something actually based on Inuit mythology.

Michelle Sturgeon, who played the identical game some years ago and was tricked into using real bullets with fatal consequences, returns with a precarious hold on her sanity to try it again. She is the catalyst of a new chain of events as the culprit, still in place at Dream Park, tries to prevent her from revealing his identity.

Add to this other plot strands concerning hacking, the terraforming of Mars (the barsoom Project of the title), the efforts of a dastardly Libyan baddy to wreck the project, several items of currently popular theoretical space technology such as skyhooks and zero gravity orbiting laboratories, and you have much the same mixture of hard sf and fantasy as before.

The Fimbulwinter Game takes up the bulk of the action — though you have to suspend your disbelief quite vigorously to imagine that Dream Park could work so realistically. The Inuit mythology is thoroughly researched and contributes to an unfamiliar and hence refreshing adventure. The idea of a game to help you lose weight is promising though, after the first few chapters, it seems to be forgotten completely at times.

The characters are rather sketchy. Niven and Branes begin well with a scene where the overweight gamers have to strip down to their underwear and participate in an Eskimo sweat-lodge ceremony, but unfortunately the authors do not take the opportunity to develop the characters much further.

The Barsoom Project is fast-paced and entertaining. If you liked **Dream Park** you'll like its sequel.

Barbara Davies

Although a sequel to **Dream Park**, this book can be read on its own with no loss to the reader. The authors, presumably, are trying to catch two markets with their blend of "hard" sf and role playing games/fantasy. The "hard sf" concerns the workings of Dream Park and the machinations connected with the Cowles Industry project (colonizing Mars) plus the possibility of Cowles Industry being taken over. The RPG/fantasy element is the adventure being enacted within Dream Park as seen by the participants. This is a quest to try and stop Earth from entering "Fimbulwinter" by overcoming a series of supernatural enemies and to reawaken the "goddess of the Sea and of the sea's life".

There is a gamble: either there are two classes of readers who will buy this book, *or* two lots of potential readers who will be put off by the aspects they dislike! The fact re-

mains that just as one is immersed in the RPG/fantasy element the viewpoint switches to Alex Griffin, Security Chief of Dream Park. You re-adjust your thoughts, remember where you last left Alex, get immersed once more in the mysteries and technicalities of the "real world" and, lo, you're switched back again to the "game".

In an Afterword the authors say "This was an ambitious project. **Dream Park was fantasy wrapped in science fiction wrapped in mystery. The Barsoom Project** is cut from the same pattern. Our intent has been to blend dozens of individual threads of information into one (we hope) seamless tapestry." I give them ten out of ten for trying but, sadly, I don't think their plan quite came off. **Dream Park** is, in some quarters, regarded as a classic and, therefore, I suppose, **The Barsoom Project** might also be considered as such by some — but not by me.

Keith Freeman

Narabedla Ltd

Frederik Pohl

Gollancz, 1990, 375pp, £13.95

The jacket blurb calls this "a highly polished entertainment". Add: and often a very funny one. In **The Way the Future Was** Pohl wrote that almost all science fiction writers are UFO sceptics, not because contactees' stories are too fantastic but because they aren't fantastic enough. After seven mundane chapters of **Narabedla** Pohl makes his bid for the fantastic ultimate. The contacting and transporting of cellists, contraltos, castrati, baton-twirlers and other artistes is to provide exotic entertainment for the Fifteen Associated Peoples. The operation keeps knowledge of the People's existence hidden from humans, while philanthropically feeding a third-world Earth items of supportive know-how (a quasi-Heecheean motif!). So a miscellany of talented, temperamental and eccentric deportees has been gathered on the "terraformed" second moon of a gas-giant nearly sixty light-years from home.

An opera company — the Greater Bolshoi — is formed to take **Don Giovanni, I Pagliacci** and **Idomeneo** to the planets of the Putreek and the Hrunwians. In populating these planets (and the Aldebaranian moon) Pohl out-monsters sf's own zoography. The fourteen-foot mantis-like Ptrreek live in bamboo skyscrapers; super-intelligent transparent shrimps swim the stinking canals of Hrumw; an ocarina-shaped organic robot comprises an orchestra; Tlottas, poodle-sized "bedbugs", are the Eyes of the omnipotent, omnivorous Mother, herself a jumbo sea-anemone. Pohl sends-up many things: the ways of accountants, booking agents and their clients; xenophobic chauvinism; grand opera (while revelling in it) — "a world composed... completely of make- believe". He even parodies sacred sensawunda. "It was a wholly fascinating, absorbing, incredible spectacle," says his protagonist (a baritone whose voice and sex life, once ruined by mumps, have been restored by Narabedla Ltd), " — Good God, actually setting foot on an *alien planet!*" Yet so assured a writer is Pohl that he can with ease in the same novel evoke a genuine sense of wonder: as when the Hyades and Aldebaran rising are viewed from the second moon's Lookout.

The novel's first 40 pages are in the style of a private-eye thriller. Then, getting into sf gear, it presents its diverting conflation of grand and space opera, spiced with a sometimes Thurberesque humour (the episode of the New York taxidriver and a leash-led Tlotta "bedbug", for example). Tensions between staying Narabedlan-happy and returning to Earth are, a shade ambiguously, resolved in a contrived but not unmoving conclusion. This "highly polished entertainment", or sf romp, theatrically extravagant though it is, does artfully interject many humanely significant and certain curiously speculative themes.

KV Bailey

Star Scroll

Melanie Rawn

Pan, 1990, 591pp, £13.95, £7.99 pb

This is the second book in the **Dragon Prince** series, moving the story through another generation. At the end of the first book, Rohan killed the evil Roelstra, became High Prince in his stead, and married the Sunrunner Witch, Sioned. However, their son Pol is actually the child of Roelstra's daughter Ianthe, conceived when she entered Rohan's bed, pretending to be Sioned.

The conservation and natural history of dragons continues to run through this second book, interwoven with the human struggle over the dragon-lands. Pol has grown up learning knightly and Sunrunner skills on the island of Dorval, but he returns to the mainland to become embroiled in a dark plot. Much of the action involves ownership of the Star Scroll, an ancient document which gives details of spells which, in the wrong hands, can be used for evil purposes.

The politics is very complicated and I found the list of characters at the end of the book very useful for frequent reference. I also re-read many passages from the first book and have learned more about the economy and topography of the dragon-lands. But Melanie Rawn has also supplied many personal touches. For example, some of the Sunrunners suffer from seasickness, a human weakness which I have not previously known to afflict fantastical characters.

Martin Brice

Escape from Kathmandu

Kim Stanley Robinson

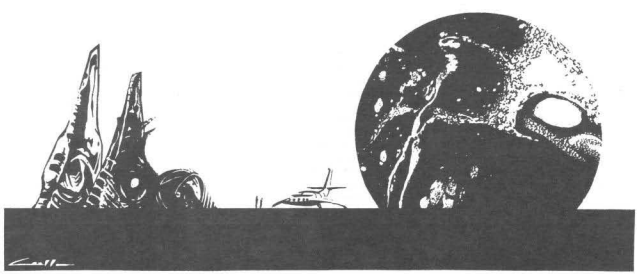
Unwin 1990, 314pp, £12.95

This book comes as something of a surprise. It is not what you'd expect from Kim Stanley Robinson given his previously published work. It is certainly not sf, cameo appearances from sundry yetis and the fabled city of Shangri-La notwithstanding. On the whole, though, it is a pleasant surprise.

Escape from Kathmandu is a collection of four separate but closely interrelated stories. They are set in Nepal, and the book is clearly some kind of homage to a country which Robinson has obviously spent some time in.

The stories revolve around a small band of expatriate Americans, especially two trekkers, Freds Fredericks and George Ferguson. In the title story they rescue a yeti captured by an unscrupulous scientific team, and in "Mother Goddess of the World", manage to make a small detour across the most inhospitable mountain wilderness in the

Artwork by Kevin A Cullen



Artwork by Kevin A Cullen

world and climb Everest totally unaided by oxygen or modern climbing equipment (a bad case of authorial wish-fulfilment here I think).

"The True Nature of Shangri-La" has our heroes grappling manfully with the kafkaesque intricacies of Nepalese bureaucracy to prevent the building of a new road to the magical city. Finally, "The Kingdom Underground" finds Freds and George co-operating with Nepal's political opposition, giving Robinson the opportunity for some overt political criticism of the current Nepalese regime.

The writing is good and consistently funny, without ever being side splitting. This is an obviously affectionate view of Nepal, despite which Robinson weaves into the book a considerable amount of serious criticism of the political system in Nepal, criticism which is sadly topical in the first half of 1990.

I am not sure what kind of market Kim Stanley Robinson is aiming at in writing this book. It will not appeal automatically to his regular sf audience, but if you like good writing, and have even a passing interest in Nepal, Tibet and the Himalayas, this is a book well worth reading.

Neale Vickery

Summertide

Charles Sheffield

Gollancz, 1990, 257pp, £13.95

Perhaps the writer's hardest task in a traditional sf novel is incorporating background information about artifacts and galactic features presently unknown to the reader.

English scientist Charles Sheffield takes the coward's way out: between each slab of plot we get a couple of pages of "quotations" from the sort of basic reference work that used to be found on every sixteen-year-old's bookshelves, providing us with a wealth of mostly unnecessary scientific background on each new object *after* it appears in the story.

Sheffield is a past president of the American Astronautical Society, and his **Earthwatch** — a collection of photographs of Earth taken from space — was an obvious best seller. As a novelist, however, I have always found him disappointing, though I would not wish to attack him and his work as viciously as some critics have in the past.

The present dull and unimaginative dustwrapper does absolutely nothing to awaken in me any interest, let alone excitement, while the discovery that it is **Book One of The Heritage Universe** made my approach even more lukewarm. This lack of expectation was, I confess, heightened by his dedication — to four young ladies "and everyone else whose (average) age is sixteen."

This is not to suggest that the technology is simplistic or the plotting at the level of juvenile space-opera. The technology is indeed beyond our grasp, the science ultimately indescribable, and the underlying tale is of mankind's expansion into a Universe already indelibly changed by the works of the long-dead Builders and inhabited by a well-varied range of alien peoples. Unfortunately, Sheffield is far more at home with his intricately imagined superscience than with real people, and the novel's personae mostly do no more than react — according to their simplistic characterisations — to the exigencies of the plot.

"To have a plot, you must have conflict" goes the writer's basic tenet, and this allows for conflicts of desire, personality or belief. Unfortunately, all too often it means the creation of illogical or unreasonable characters "because that's the way people are" — but this fails to work unless the author can persuade you that the internal contradictions and illogicalities make sense to us as far-from-logical people ourselves. These characters are constructed solely to allow Sheffield's complex, fascinating and undoubtedly intellectually challenging scientific creations to exercise their influence upon them. The personae are hard to empathise with, and the reader's loyalty may switch from one to another, a fatal flaw in what is ultimately less a novel than a puzzle embellished with cardboard actors.

Ken Lake

Carrion Comfort

Dan Simmons

Headline, 1990, 690pp, £14.95

Voices

Tim Wynne-Jones

Hodder and Stoughton, 1990, 312pp, £12.95

Step by step, the forces of darkness are taking over... Dan Simmons is another of those sf authors now choosing to plow a lucrative furrow with the contemporary horror novel. He's obviously a versatile chap, having won the World Fantasy Award with **Song of Kali**, and is probably best known in sf fields for his **Hyperion** series. Now comes **Carrion Comfort**, which is likely to provide many happy and busy hours for Mr Simmons' accountants, pitched squarely at the nasty end of the market but perhaps lacking that psychopathological twinge so deftly handled by Clive Barker.

It's the old one about mind vampires secretly controlling the rest of the human race. The body count would not disgrace a limited nuclear conflict, which indeed is what we are promised by the twist-in-the-end-tale end, the equivalent of the last reel when the vampire climbs out of the coffin again... There I've gone and spoilt it for you, which is perhaps a good thing because this is a truly loathsome work; each decapitation, disembowelment and dismemberment lovingly described and liberally spiced with a few juicy rape scenes. It is, regrettably, an intelligently-written book, but the main problem is that much of the background and plot hinges on the Nazi death camps, again described in some detail, and I would respectfully suggest that Simmons is here dealing with horrors that might best be left out of the pages of a lucrative best-seller.

It is a relief to turn to Tim Wynne-Jones' **Voices**, a slim and sensitive work which is likely to prove a sore disappointment for fans of Simmons browsing along the same bookshelves. Decapitations are kept to a minimum, and the horror while still there is more of the psychological variety.

A young Canadian nurse, recently separated from her husband under circumstances not fully described, is exploring the West Country when she comes across a ruined castle, some attendant ghosts and a talking hole. It is swiftly apparent that she is in flight from her past, which she is eventually forced to confront. The author blends complex symbolism, post-Freudian psychology and fantasy elements, as well as a degree of dry irony, most noticeably in the conversations with the hole. It all sounds a little bizarre, but he writes well and affectingly, and it works.

It will be lucky to sell a hundredth of Simmons' efforts, already being given the dump bin treatmehnt in popular bookshops, and that is the real horror.

Martin Waller

Perspectives

John Spencer

Macdonald, 1990, 255pp, £12.95

Over the years, many people have claimed that they have been kidnapped by alien beings and taken away for a while to a spacecraft or flying saucer. This is a fascinating belief, and there is no question that many of the abductees sincerely believe that their ordeal really occured. Their various stories have a great deal in common, in particular the emphasis on medical examinations by and/or sexual relations with the aliens. It is significant, too, that in many cases the full details of the ordeal are recalled only under hypnosis. Like flying saucers themselves, these stories tell us more about the human psyche than they do about interstellar navigation. They tap deep veins of the unconscious areas of our minds, in the same way as (for example) the tales of child sacrifice and ritual abuse that have persisted over the centuries, directed at whichever sub-group of social pariahs was most vulnerable at any given time. There is certainly scope for a comprehensive examination of alien abduction stories but this, alas (though by a leading member of BUFORA) is not it. It's woolly, it waffles, it's full of undigested anecdotes and it fails to pull the material together into a coherent account. It left me unsatisfied and longing for a better book. Not recommended.

Darroll Pardoe

Skin of the Soul

Lisa Tuttle (ed)

Women's Press, 1990, 231pp, £5.95

There have been innumerable collections of horror stories written by men, although they invariably suppress any gender label and instead purport to speak on behalf of the whole human race. This masculine self-assurance can put a collection like this, which announces that its stories are written specifically by women, on the defensive, as if women were some sort of minority interest group. Of course, no apology is needed and in an admirable introduction Lisa Tuttle stakes out the territory that she and her fellow authors are laying claim to by right.

There are, she writes, some fears that are common to both men and women, but others appear to be personal and individual, deriving from our gender identities. As she puts it, we all understand the language of fear, but men and women speak that language with different dialect. This book is a deliberate attempt to make women's voices heard in the field of horror fiction and on these grounds alone deserves to be unreservedly welcomed.

What of the collection itself? Out of 17 stories only a few failed to satisfy. The stories by Melanie Tem, Josephine Saxton, Terry McGarry, Ann Walsh, Pauline Dungate, Sherry Coldsmith and Melissa Mai Hall are all successful exercises in horror. My favourites, however, are Lisa Tuttle's "Mr Elphinstone's Hands," a despairing tale of a young woman whose body involuntarily begins discharging ectoplasm; Cherry Wilder's "Anzas Day," a powerful story of homicidal misogyny; Ann Goring's "Hantu-Hantu," a colonial fiction of vampirism and madness; and Karen Joy Fowler's "The Night Wolf," a grim story of child abuse that should be required reading.

Best of all, however, is Suzy McKee Charnas marvellous "Boobs," a sort of "Female Werewolf in America" story. Young Kelsey's discovery of her lycanthropic abilities and her wreaking of vengeance on the obnoxious Billy Linden is an absolute delight: "Who would think that somebody as horrible as Billy Linden could taste so good?" "The Afterward" is worth reading as well. This story alone would justify getting hold of the book.

John Newsinger

The Ice-Shirt

William T Vollmann

Deutsch, 1990, 404pp, £14.95

Described as a component of a multi-volume "Book of North American Landscapes", this metafiction creatively interweaves and "novelises" material from the **Eddas**, the Norse Sagas, anthropological and historical writings, and from the author's own field research experiences. Vollmann, in an appended note defining his "Symbolic History", says he aims to create "an account of origins and metamorphoses which is often untrue based on literal facts, but whose untruths further a deeper sense of truth." Such as sense conveys that the metaphorically "icy hearts" of the westward-moving Norsemen destine a cruel impress on Vinland, once frost-free, but then donning the "ice shirt".

The first date in a chronology (there are fifty pages of essential scholarly — but readable — notes, glossaries and source data) is 30 000 BC, the latest 1987 AD. The text only roughly observes sequence. Thus into a prehistoric (Eskimo ancestral) sub-section, "The Hermaphrodite", a fable-like insight into primal bisexuality, is interpolated a chapter "San Francisco Transvestites 1987"; and prehistory is immediately followed by a "documentary" chapter concerning events in Greenland dated 1390—1646. By "chapter" I mean one of the captioned short sections ranging from a hundred or less to a thousand or more words into which the narrative is divided.

These somewhat disorienting juxtapositions are not arbitrary and do at length shape a compelling mosaic. The patterning of feuds, journeys, matings, murders, sympathetic and shamanistic magic which largely comprise it is back-grounded by that vast northern myth-land stretching from Midgaard beyond Ginguna Gap to Niflheim and Jotunheim. There are literally hundreds of actors on the scene: Bearsark and Skraeling, god and mortal, ancient and contemporary. Preeminent are the witch-like Freydis, daughter of Eric the Red, and her arch-enemy, the beautiful Gudrid Thornbjornsdottir. Over and above the human content, however, there is the mythic and the cosmic. The horror of the entry of Freydis into Niflheim appalls. The section "the Sun and the Moon", mythologising their circumpolar appearances, is strangely, uniquely, beautiful. That section carries a footnoted quotation from Howard Hinton's **The Fourth Dimension** counterpointing myth with a quite other, but not irrelevant, mode of observation and speculation — a frequent function of numerous footnotes, epigraphs and allusions.

The Ice-Shirt, recipient of the **Spectator** Shiva Naipaul Memorial Award, is a long and sustaining work that can be returned to time and again for its icy and human horrors, its human and arctic splendours, and for the vista it opens into those regions of the mind where landscape, legend, myth and history merge.

KV Bailey

Angel Station

Walter Jon Williams

Orbit, 1990, 393pp, £12.95

Angel Station is, to be frank, dull. Bear-bankrupt, incestuous "test tube" brother and sister flee the authorities with the help of her lover, the younger son of a rival trading family. By accident they make First Contact, discover a means to a quick fortune, outwit their rivals and live happily ever after.

I had hoped that this kind of thing had been put to death. Only the boldest imagination, and the most skilled prose, can add life to this subgenre, and Williams has never had those attributes. Previously his style has been tenth-rate Zelazny; here it seems more like tenth-rate Gordon R Dickson.

Perhaps **Angel Station** would be readable if you didn't know better, but so many little

things niggled and jarred that it was impossible to find any rhythm. Williams' over use of the word "glitch" to describe Beautiful Maria's unexplained mental power over electronic equipment; the very name "Beautiful Maria; "random use of the infinitive "be" in place of assorted first, second and third person pronoun-verb combinations as a supposed concession to far future language change; an alien called Beloved and her autonomous unit General Volitional Twelve; commonplace drug use, of drugs called Red Four and Blue Seven; Ubu plays a futuristic guitar. All of these clichs and a dozen more are sprayed aimlessly throughout the book, spoiling what would be a poor novel without them. They don't ever ring true, they have no internal logic, no rational basis to justify their existence. Is it not time we had a little rationality in Science Fiction? It might destract us, if only briefly, from the non-existent characterisation, nodescript settings and rehashed plot droppings of novels like this one.

Angel Station is so dull that its most notable feature is the bizarre proofing errors which have passed directly from the American TOR edition into this later UK edition. A correction sheet is available from TOR should you be unwise enough actually to buy this book.

Kev McVeigh

Gypsies

Roberts Charles Wilson
Orbit, 1990, 311pp, £6.99

When I was a small child, I used to wonder whether life still carried on in the places where I had been on holiday. Egocentric perhaps, but I used to imagine that if I concentrated very hard I could be there. Both as children and adults, the characters in **Gypsies** can open doors to alternative realities and be there in both thought and body. Meanwhile they are watched by the Grey Man, whom they see as a threatening pursuer.

This is that all-too-rare animal: a review book it is possible to forget that one is reviewing and simply enjoy. The style is clear, the characterisation sharp, with obvious moral positions; a more psychological approach might obscure the plot.

To Karen, Laura and Tim as children, it seems they have never lived anywhere for long, and the mobility which gives the book its name is a family joke. Only when Karen's son, Michael, begins to exhibit the talent for inter-world travel which she has suppressed but which is exploited by her more flamboyant sister and absent, wayward brother, does their difference from other humans become explicit. They learn that their parents were "made" (in a semi-magical way) in a parallel reality in which the USA is called the "Novos Ordo" and endowed by the Defense Research Institute in Washington with the ability to travel the "plenum", the sum total of time and space. This throws some light on the abuse (self-defeating, despite the internal justification) they suffered as children from their adoptive father, and upon the family's habit of moving. In an unfortunate plot twist the institute is approached by the powerful Vatican to find the offspring of the family and force them to travel behind Islamic enemy lines for no readily apparent reason. There can be no excuse for such sloppiness if the writer seeks to establish a credible, self-supporting, alternative reality.

Writing believable fiction of this type in a world already populated by Roberts and Cowper is quite a challenge. That said, this book never loses its capacity to entertain right royally, and why indeed should there not be accessible books in the genre whose main function simply is to entertain?

Michael Fearn

Soldier of Arete

Gene Wolfe
New English Library, 1990, 354pp, £13.95

The normal imperative of a novel is forward in time: the future is a mystery but the past is clear with all its resonances and implications running through the story as a steadily developing theme. In his sequel to **Soldier of the Mist**, again narrated by the mercenary, Latro, whose memory extends no further than a day into the past, Gene Wolfe defies this conventional structure. Here the past is closed off, and the predictions and soothsayings which litter the book mean the future is often more clearly known. The forward progression of the novel, therefore, seems to take us away from what is most interesting. And because each episode is completely shut off by the wall of forgetting, we are denied the gradual build-up of clues from the past to create a revelation. The reader must supply Latro's memory in order to hold the entire enterprise together.

One effect of this is an emotionally cold and distanced novel. When Latro needs to be reminded in each chapter who his companions are, and when he has forgotten the woman he loves the day after she is killed, there can be no true involvement. Despite Latro being regularly reminded of his love, and a suggestion of buried emotion, too much has already been lost for there to be any genuine sense of loss.

The technical problems created by this structure are handled brilliantly by Wolfe. **Soldier of Arete** is a better book than its predecessor; the necessary repetitions, the reminders to Latro to write in the scroll, and of who his companions are, being achieved far more smoothly and effectively. It is a virtuoso performance, but one wonders whether it will win the applause, or even the attention, of anyone not already a devotee.

The plot has to be disinterred from the breaks, leaps and recapitulations dictated by the narrative form. Latro, with a varying group of companions, journeys through Thrace, then to Athens, Sparta and Delphi (or Thought, Rope and Dolphins as these three are known in the text), and there are further appearances by gods and ghosts along the way. At one point he learns a memory-training device which promises to make Latro a less frustrating narrator; but then, in Sparta, some treachery happens which throws him into a sort of fugue state again, and in the final section at the sacred games in Delphi it is like we are right back at the beginning of the whole enterprise. Wolfe has always used indirect style, and subjective viewpoints which can't quite grasp the full picture at the time; coupled with the limitations imposed by the structure of the book it is often difficult to disentangle the very bloody and dramatic incidents which make up this novel and find out what is actually happening. Nevertheless, on the evidence of this volume, the story of Latro should be emerging from the shadow cast by the New Sun.

Paul Kincaid

Artwork by Kevin A Cullen

The Scions of Shannara

Terry Brooks

Orbit, 1990, 390pp, £12.95

The Renegades of Pern

Anne McCaffrey

Bantam, 1990, 384pp, £12.95

These two books represent contrasting approaches to the continuation of commercially successful series, and achieve contrasting levels of success.

McCaffrey simply slots another story into the previously established dragon world Pern while Brooks takes the Shannara series 300 years beyond its last incarnation. There are other differences: McCaffrey retains at least the forms of sf while Brooks writes out and out sword and sorcery; and the Pern story is essentially light entertainment as against Shannara's dark fantasy. The basic difference though is that McCaffrey is the better writer and her book works whereas Brooks never quite encourages the reader to that suspension of disbelief so essential to good fantasy.

The events in **The Renegades of Pern** run concurrently with those of **The White Dragon**, and many are common to both. This can be a problem: the main plot is already familiar to anyone who has read the earlier book, especially the central discovery of the origins of Pern's first colonists. For the most part the characters are the same too, with the reappearance of Jaxom, Ruth, Sharra, Piemur and Toric, plus cameo appearances from other familiar faces.

The principal additions are the eponymous renegades, a collection of misfits and outcasts gathered together under the leadership of Thella, the renegade Lady Holder of Telgar. The main plot revolves around Thella's descent from noble birth through rebellion to defeat and subsequent thirst for revenge.

Whatever you may think of McCaffrey's "dragon" books (I confess they are not to my taste) there is no denying her abilities as a storyteller. Even though many of the main events are not virgin territory I wanted to keep reading to find out what happens. If you haven't read McCaffrey's previous books this is a largely amiable but tangential introduction to Pern. If you are familiar with the other books this doesn't really add very much, but it is a light romp through familiar territory.

Terry Brooks on the other hand sets **The Scions of Shannara** 300 years after **The Wishsong of Shannara**. The Four Lands are now dominated by the totalitarian Federation, the elves have vanished, the druids are no more and only the unwilling descendants of Shannara's earlier heroes possess the magic needed to save the Lands... Add to this unpromising scenario a quest for each hero and the standard fantasy formula is complete. Though no great stylist, Brooks is a competent enough writer, but he occasionally succumbs to the temptation to rescue his heroes from impossible situations with revelations of magic never before seen (the "with one bound he was free" syndrome) and his plotting relies upon too many fortuitous coincidences to be truly believeable.

The Scions of Shannara is the first of a new trilogy and the ending leaves the reader hanging unsatisfactorily in mid adventure. **The Renegades of Pern**, though more limited in ambition, is a more worthy addition to a previously successful series.

Neale Vickery

Reviews Editor

Because of an increasing work-load due to his being promoted, Paul Kincaid will be stepping down as Reviews Editor for **Vector** as from this coming Christmas. While we're sorry to see Paul go, a new Reviews Editor is needed as soon as possible so that an efficient change-over can be made. The job is an important and demanding position, requiring great commitment, good organisational skills and above all a keenness to to a difficult job well.

If you feel you have these abilities and would like to be considered for the post, please write to the editors at

11 Marsh Street
Barrow-in-Furness
Cumbria LA14 2AE

(a copy of your application to both editors' addresses would be greatly appreciated).

The Mammoth Book of Ghost Stories

Richard Dalby (Ed)

Robinson, 1990, 654pp, £4.99

Midnight Tales

Bram Stoker

Peter Owen, 1990, 182pp, £13.50

The realm of the supernatural story is one in which collectors and afficionados look for neglected masterpieces, while those who fancy a collection of ghost stories to take on holiday might prefer something less scholarly but more (I hope you recognise the pun) ghostly.

The **Mammoth Books** are aimed, perhaps, at "holiday-goers", but holiday-goers who are by no means newcomers to the field and welcome something different. Richard Dalby has brought his considerable expertise to bear in a volume which shows the range of the ghost story without necessarily relying on old favourites. True, classic authors are here: from Sheridan Le Fanu and Edgar Allan Poe to Ramsey Campbell and Karl Edward Wagner by way of MR James, EF Benson, Charles Dickens, Henry James and DH Lawrence. But there are also scarcer, less collected items such as Nugent Barker's "Whessoe" to be found in this well-thought-out collection.

Some stories are anecdotes rather than *stories*, and some demand an appreciation of changing literary fashions — William Hope Hodgson's "The Valley of Lost Children" runs stickily with sentimentality. But high points are Ramsey Campbell's *definitely* Jamesian "The Guide". Robert Aickman's "The Unsettled Dust" which shows how a

ghost story can have chilling psychological undertones, and Mark Valentine's "The Folly", a wry updating of the old tradition of the "psychic investigator"; while a taste of Mark Twain ("A Ghost Story") or Oscar Wilde ("The Canterville Ghost") serves to refresh the reader for further forays into the more conventionally spooky.

Midnight Tales is perhaps one for the specialist. Bram Stoker's other work is doomed to be overshadowed by Dracula, and **Midnight Tales** contains "The Dream in the Dead House", an episode cut from the first chapter of **Dracula**, and two expurgated chapters from **The Jewel of the Seven Stars**. Editor Peter Haining sets the stories well in context, showing their genesis in dinner-table conversations with the actor Henry Irving, but this doesn't make up for their frequent mediocrity — particularly the short-shorts which were to make up a collection whose projected title Haining has resurrected. On the other hand, **Dracula** fans and those who like Stoker enough to collect his works will welcome this books appearance, and there are two stories here which are certainly unforgettable — the gory and Poe-esque "The Squaw" and "Dualists", one of the most *tasteless* stories I've read, which if filmed or written in a contemporary idiom would cause uproar among Guardians of Decency but which is mainly notable because of its glorious numb gruesomeness.

Andy Sawyer

Mindsail

Anne Gay

Orbit, 1990, 303pp, £12.95

Publishers' blurbs are getting worse. Who could meet the expectations raised by: "Reminiscent of Ursula Le Guin at her best"? Does it really help the prospective reader? To which type of Le Guin does it refer — **The Earthsea Trilogy** or **The Left Hand Of Darkness**?

Mindsail is the first novel by Anne Gay, a full-time teacher of three languages — this fact is relevant, bear with me.

A starship of colonists from Earth crashed on Rosaria many generations ago. The colonists' descendants have split into factions, each pursuing a different way of life and holding different beliefs about what happened when the starship landed.

Tohalla, the heroine, is a member of the "Green". This rural, largely patriarchal, vegetarian society ekes out a precarious existence — burning and killing the native flora and fauna and trying to recreate Earth conditions. The "Reds", are carnivores who live in harmony with Rosaria's strange environment. There is a feud between these two societies. The plot catalyst is the arrival at the "Green" colony of two captured "Reds", and their subsequent effect on Tohalla's life.

Anne Gay has created a credible planet with convincingly alien flora and fauna. Her characters are detailed and well developed, with realistic flaws. But the plot loses its way slightly and the ending doesn't seem to follow entirely logically from previous events.

The style is intelligent though sometimes the alliteration hits you in the eye and points to a poet struggling to escape. An addiction to adjectives is also evident. The major flaw is the decision to portray alien language in an alien way, so that the verb is at the end of the sentence. For example:

"No need for worry is, Toh. No-one after us will come".

Reading every sentence twice to understand its meaning becomes a little tiring; it gets between the reader and the story. This seems to have been a calculated risk by an author familiar with foreign languages — but it didn't pay off.

Mindsail is certainly not as good as Le Guin at her best, using **The Left Hand of Darkness** for comparison. Considered on its own merits, it is creditable but flawed. If she can curb her love for over-poetic language and remember not to get between the reader and the story I'd say this author is one to watch.

Barbara Davies

Science Fiction, Fantasy and Horror Reference

Keith L Justice

St James, 1989, 226pp, £18.00

The subtitle of this book is "An Annotated Bibliography of Works about Literature and Film". It is intended to provide librarians with a convenient bibliography (complete with short analysis) of reference works on science fiction they might be considering buying for their library. As such, one would expect it to be a fairly comprehensive survey of key reference works on the subject. Yet within my own fairly small reference library I discovered 50 books that were not among the 304 covered in Justice's volume. What's more, that 50 included many which I would have considered fundamental elements of any sf reference library, including **Twentieth Century Science Fiction Writers** edited by Curtis Smith, **The Jewel-Hinged Jaw** by Samuel Delany, **Microworlds** by Stanislaw Lem, **Explorations of the Marvellous** by Peter Nicholls, **The Entropy Exhibition** by Colin Greenland, **Scientific Romance in Britain** by Brian Stableford, **Only Apparently Real** by Paul Williams, **Benchmarks** by Algis Budrys, **Science Fiction Handbook** by L Sprague de Camp... I could go on. The point is if a book such as this is not comprehensive, it is useless. Anyone building a science fiction reference library who turns to this volume for assistance will be missing some of the very books which no reference library could afford to be without.

Justice as good as admits that the book is skimpy. In his introduction he tells us that "Over 200 of the books annotated in this volume are represented in the personal reference collection of the compiler." In other words, more than two-thirds of the book was compiled without him even having to leave his home. He adds, "if a great deal more time had been set aside for research, this listing might have contained 500 entries rather than 300." One wonders, therefore, why more time was not set aside. This is an astounding admission of dereliction of duty. If the book could have been nearly twice as comprehensive with just a little bit more effort from Justice, then it might have been worth doing. His comments upon the books he does include are at least adequate, though I would question his judgement in certain instances. But there is no excuse for the sheer laziness which marks this very inadequate book.

Paul Kincaid

Alien Zone:

Cultural Theory and Contemporary Science Fiction Cinema

Annette Kuhn (Ed.)

Verso, 1990, 231pp, £24.95, £8.95 pb

Clive Barker's Nightbreed

Clive Barker

Fontana, 1990, 239pp, £9.99

Out on the academic frontier this anthology, edited by the Lecturer in Film and Television Studies at Glasgow University, brings together 18 essays: four are reprinted from **Science-Fiction Studies**, others from specialist media journals, and three are directly contributed. The excellent editorial Introduction discusses and inter-relates the range of approaches: "sociological criticism, Marxism, semantics, structuralism, psychoanalysis, deconstruction (and) feminism".

The Alien and **Blade Runner** are cited more or less throughout these approaches. Films as diverse as **The Terminator, 2001: A Space Odyssey, Invasion of the Body Snatchers** and the **Star Wars** and **Star Trek** sequences get constant analytic and hermeneutic treatment. Central to one of the most closely argued and interestingly documented essays, Giuliana Bruno's "Ramble City: Postmodernism and **Blade Runner**", is an account of the role of the "replicant" in the condition of schizophrenia. Film as a reworking of the primal scene is the subject of Barbara Creed's "**Alien** and the Monstrous Feminine", a theme echoed in Daniel Devin's "Primal Conditions and Conventions" (unintended *double entendre*!), which moves from a parallel study of basic sexual motifs in traditional mythology and science fiction to an original psychoanalytic interpretation of **Bodysnatchers**. Several essays are sensitive to the respective "languages" of cinematic and literary science fiction. Annette Kuhn suggests that the special effects technology of science fiction cinema (with what Steve Neale in his contribution seems to be its element of self-reflexivity) is what distinguishes it from other film genres, and from science fiction writing.

Modes of spectatorship, and spectacle as narrative, are frequent theoretical considerations in **Alien Zone**. The privilegedly environed and voyeur-like situation of the

cinema spectator cannot, however, enter into his/her confrontation with the published film play, even when stills, drawings, and representations of special effects are as well selected, reproduced and deployed as they are in **Clive Barker's Nightbreed**. Divorced from their medium, and lacking colour, music and motion, stills can only remind or signify: but they can, and here do, assist awareness of how the visual narrative is progressed, being, scene by scene, woven together with point-of-view and locational directions, dialogue and description, into the ghostly yet, paradoxically, articulated analogue of a cinematic experience. The movie, written and directed by Barker and based on his **Cabal**, is the end product of what he calls in his Foreword "the constant configuration" to which "the images that first play on the screen inside your skull" are subjected. Such manipulations and transformations are described in the Introduction, with generous illustration and a wealth of illuminating anecdote; and the results are made specific in the presentation of the play itself. It is an admirably produced book of interest to all devotees of the horror-fantasy genre and its cinema — and to cineastes in general.

KV Bailey

The Silent City

Elisabeth Vonarburg

Women's Press, 1990, 247pp, £4.95

'Never judge a book by its cover". How true. I only wish my heart didn't sink whenever I receive a Women's Press or Virago book to review. Not that women can not, do not, write the most excellent sf — Angela Carter, Christine Brooke-Rose, Ursula Le Guin, et al — but those I have read from these "committed" presses have often annoyed me with bad science, bored me with half baked polemics and dispirited me with writing of the direst quality. All too often the wholes have been less than the sums of the parts. Elisabeth Vonarburg begins in familiar territory — a city hermetically sealed from the vaguely contaminated outside in which the elect go out of their foetid minds with angst and ennui. Elisa though, is not only one of the last — entropy does rule — she is different. She rebels against her father/lover and leaves to recreate the world.

The first section of the book is weekly written, lacking anything original in concept. Had I not been reading this for review I would not have got to page 72. Which would have been my loss. Once Elisa leaves the City everything changes. As the ideas take life — Elisa is not only more than she knows she is more than she wants to be — so does the quality of the prose.

It is difficult to discuss the plot of her adventures without giving away the twists, which is not the purpose of a reviewer. Elisa is a shapechanger who spends much of the story in male form, even falling in love as a man. At the time this seems pleasant enough, but not significant. In Ms Vonarburg's story, though, everything is significant and the outcome of a literal battle of the sexes depends upon it. She would rather not shape change, but her "children" lack her inhibitions as family ties wind ever more tightly.

The blurb says **"The Silent City"** engages with important issues ... in a plot full of twists and surprises". For once you can believe what is found on the back cover. It does all of that, and more, and I heartily recommend it to everyone. My only question is why has it taken a decade to arrive here after its first, French, publication in Canada?

Martyn Taylor

Roderick at Random

John Sladek

Kerosina, 1990, 317pp, £13.95, £40 Collector's Edition

This is the second of John Sladek's two satirical novels about Roderick, the innocent robot. They were originally one work but on the grounds of size their original publisher divided them, and then published this one only in paperback. Eight years later Kerosina have brought out the first hardback edition.

The novel begins with Roderick working as a bowl-washer at Danton's Doggie Dinette, but he does not manage to keep even that job and is soon reduced to destitution, hanging out with beggars and freaks. He wants to help but when he offers assistance to the police, they ignore him.

The original novel, **Roderick**, described his being created in secrecy and illegally, and people have been hunting him ever since (including a one-legged man after the fugitive robot), but Roderick stays free. However, everything goes against him, yet for all his education — and Roderick is a very well intentioned robot keen on self-improvement and eager to help others — he does not realise how bad the world is. At one stage we hear Roderick's fantasies, all taken from books of extreme violence, but they don't mean anything to him until 300 pages later it strikes home and he becomes a robot suicide.

The **Roderick** books are the product of a massive intention. The plotting is very elaborate and Roderick himself is only one strand of the novel, there are two or three others which are intertwined. Equally, they are works of Swiftian satire — but very black. The moral that Roderick has to learn (and which kills him) is that nearly everyone is self-interested, most of those that are not are perverts, and the rest are affected by a cruel indifference.

With their background in robotics the books include philosophic and logical discussions as well as a wide range of literature, and they are full of pastiche and reference — how many people now remember television's **The Fugitive** and the one-armed man? or that George Orwells first book was about his experiences washing dishes in a large Parisian hotel? — and in that sense are densely written.

Where some people would disagree with me is this: I don't find the two books very funny; but, that does not stop them being very clever and a good read.

LJ Hurst

Black Milk

Robert Reed

Orbit, 1990, 327pp, £6.99

Black Milk has not gone off, but it isn't fresh.

The plot is strong, and very simple: Earth's ecostructure has become genetically "Tailored" by the archetypal Promethean scientist, Dr Florida, a sort of tragic techno-Wonka. Reed's Earth is admirably real in its own terms, not a Utopian/Dystopian model. Like Dr Frankenstein, Dr Florida's downfall is ambition; he plans to sow life in the atmosphere of Jupiter but his indestructible, genetically synthesised sparkhounds escape and threaten to annihilate life on the mother planet.

The narration is more interesting. The story is told by Ryder, a sensitive boy with an eidetic memory (genetically tailored) who comes into contact with Dr Florida. The novel is an account of the collision between Ryder's Innocent world of treehouses, gangs and playground politics, and Ryder's Experienced world of adulthood, sexuality and global disaster. Dr Florida is interested in Ryder's perfect memory as a defence against an understandably hostile posterity. He is also interested in Ryder and his friends because he is a nostalgic, troubled old man, entranced by the vitality of youth. He is a memorable character, despite his silly name.

What bothers me about this novel however is that I feel it does nothing new. I am consciously aware of the presence of Wyndham and Clarke (global entropy and gifted children), Twain (a child's first person narrative), Borges (perfect memory) and of course Huxley (genetic manipulation). There is nothing wrong with using this set of widespread devices, but I feel that the author has not creatively, originally, or even as competently as any of the writers mentioned above. Certainly, the novel was enjoyable, the characterisation animated and the dialogue convincing, but I can't write a glowing review for "Black Milk" because I don't feel that it matters very much.

David Mitchell

Good Omens

Terry Pratchett & Neil Gaiman

Gollancz, 1990, 268pp, £12.95

The trade of the humorist is both difficult and skilled. The mistake made by so many is to assume that making people laugh is all that is required, but of course it's not as simple as that. Take, for example, Armageddon, probably the most unpromising subject for a single joke, let alone a sustained humorous piece. It would be all to easy to transgress

the unmarked bounds of good taste and produce an intensely repellant and unfunny work. However, Terry Pratchett and Neil Gaiman, both skilled practitioners of the art of humour, have taken such unpromising material and turned it into an amusing and entertaining novel. How come they succeed where others might fail? They succeed because **Good Omens** is not laugh-a-minute, knockabout fun. Rather, it relies on sharp observation of the human condition, and flashes of insight which leave the reader wondering why he hadn't noticed that before or nodding in recognition of shared but secret knowledge. More importantly, they understand the function of juxtaposing the totally absurd with the utterly mundane, and they know when to puncture the inflated bubble of human pretension. Finally, their individual styles are complementary, Pratchett the light-hearted entertainer, while Gaiman brings a darker humour, with just a hint of underlying nastiness.

So, in the Pratchett and Gaiman universe, Armageddon is going to happen next Saturday, just after tea. It's even, and uncharacteristically, been accurately prophesied, by one Agnes Nutter. This puts Azirphale, angel, antiquarian book dealer, collecter of books of prophesy, and his friend Crowley, one of the nicer sorts of demon, in a quandary for they've come to like Earth just as it is, and to understand and appreciate its inhabitants in a way that, they suspect, God and the Devil don't. However, stopping the Apocalypse isn't that simple, particularly as they need to kill the Anti-Christ, something they're not too happy about, particularly when he happens to be a fundamentally decent eleven year old boy, with a dog, a gang and currently very keen on supporting the environment; all in all, a latterday William Brown. Just to complicate matters further, there is that little problem of the Witchfinder's Army, all two of it, the four Motorcyclists of the Apocalypse, and Agnes Nutter's last surviving descendant, probably the only person who really does know what's going on.

Gaiman and Pratchett pile on the absurdities but the plot, for all the diversions, is still that great old story of a race against time to save the universe as we know it, and the characters in it are familiar types, not so much black and white as varying shades of grey. Great truths are revealed, like the M25 being discovered to be a sigil of great and evil power (hence it's always jammed and under repair), and that quite often, despite the mess they're making, it's better to let people muddle through, making mistakes here and there, and then learning the hard way, rather than laying down finite laws, and dividing people into good or evil. That's the essence of an effective piece of humour. It says things one might not have expected to hear, and says them in very entertaining ways.

Maureen Porter

Red Spider White Web

Misha

Morrigan, 1990, 216pp, £13.95, £40 Collector's Edition

Red Spider White Web, Misha's first novel, is about a hard, cruel world, peopled by hard, cruel people. her view of the future is bleak and unremitting. Society is split between the dreamers of Mickey-san, the workers of Dogton and the rest, the dregs who struggle and fight for life in Ded-Tek. But Ded-Tek is where Art survives. A pitiful colony of artists string together vivid holograms created from salvaged images and sounds from the past and survives by selling these images in the market.

This novel is full of texture. The prose switches from the uncompromising jargon of the dialogue and background to the starkly accurate descriptions of places and people that are almost photographic in their detail and colour...

> "I hate GAPs for being such dung beetles. They ain't beans, they ain't cans, they ain't spam or kikeibutsu mincemeat or even wiggers."
>
> Kumo moved towards the booths full of mingei, either Japanese, or American folk art. She stopped and watched a potter wheel his pot in the old way. Even washi was offered here. Kumo stopped in front of a stall with rice paper, just as she did every market day, to stare. Paper, canvas, these things were so rare.

It is in the art that the sharp contrasts of this society become obvious. The drab, brown world of the Ded-Tek gives birth to bright vibrant (if occasionally violent) artforms which seem to be the only spark of innovation left in the world. Even the murderer stalking the artists sees his crimes as an art form.

But all of this is only background. The strength of this novel is in the characters. They seem at first to be mere ciphers brutally struggling through a brutal world and scraping survival by any way that they can, but as the story unfolds, they begin to show other deeper aspects of their natures. Misha ties all of this together skilfully, transforming characters who seem at first to be without any redeeming features into people that we can learn to care about.

Red Spider White Web is not an easy book to read, the depressing background, the violence, the complex prose sprinkled with Japanese and jargon, make for an unsettling mix, but the strength of Misha's vision, her complex, sometimes charismatic characters are enough to transcend this and hold the attention through to the last page.

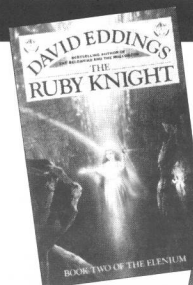
Jon Wallace

IMPORTANT NOTICE

Due to a variety of difficulties, including late copy, inexperience with a new computer system, and finally culminating with an inefficient postal service, this issue of **Vector** failed to make the required deadline last time round and was thus not printed. As a consequence of missing those 24 pages, we will be adding extra pages with each issue until those 24 are made up — this will allow us a greater flexibility with the next few issues, with longer/more features and reviews, and also create less strain upon our collators, saving them from having to collate two issues at once.

The editors wish to apologise for this cockup, and would also like to express our gratitude to our readers for being patient with us.

DISCOVER
the new worlds



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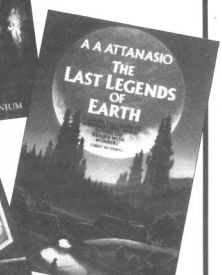

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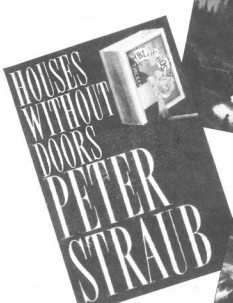

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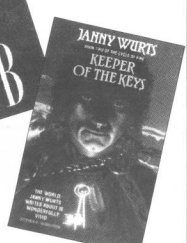

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