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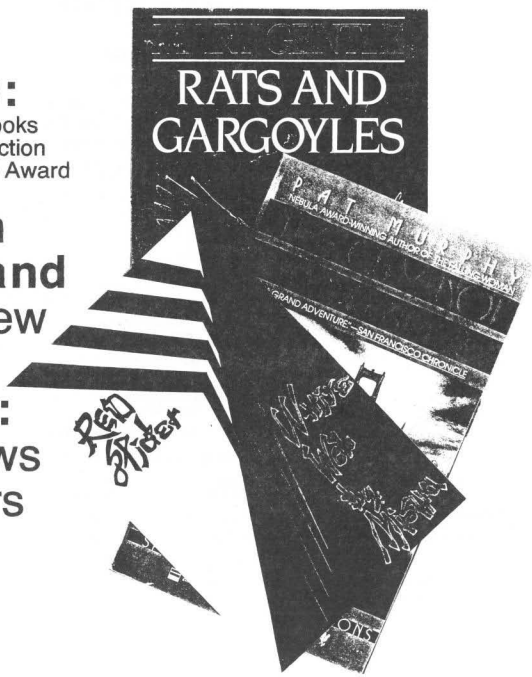
The Critical Journal Of The British Science Fiction Association

1990:

Best Five Books
Best Short Fiction
Arthur C Clarke Award

**Colin
Greenland**
Interview

Plus:
Reviews
Letters



Vector

June/July 1991 → Issue 161

Contents

- 3 Editorial
 - 4 Letters
 - 5 Colin Greenland Interview
 - 8 1990: The Best Five Books
 - 12 Some Thoughts about the Arthur C Clarke Award
 - 14 Book Reviews
 - 23 Index to Books reviewed
 - Back Cover 1990: Best Short Fiction
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Artists: Cover Art, Illustrations and fillers are always welcome.

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Editorial

By
Kev McVeigh

Roy Hattersley MP, the deputy leader of the Labour Party, appeared on BBC TV's book review programme *Speaking Volumes*, last year. As with most of the guests on that programme, I agreed with a portion of his remarks though by no means all, but there was one remark which my instant response was to deride, until he explained and I thought further. The book in question was *The Book Of Fantasy*, edited by the late Jorge Luis Borges and others, which was justly well-received by the panel. Hattersley shared this view but expressed the opinion that so much fantasy and the majority of that collection seemed to be about what happens in other countries. He cited Borges, Bradbury and Kipling in defense of this claim, but there are many other examples.

It is perhaps unfortunate in many respects that Fantasy literature seems to be defined by the plethora of reactionary post-Tolkienists producing right-wing trilogies of little imaginative merit pushed out by lazy editors who seek only short term profits. In so many of these series we find an ostensibly working-class hero thrust into adventure to rescue the heroine and the country from the evil dark lord who never seems to come from the South or the West for some reason. At the end of this morally naive conceit the hero is welcomed as the long-lost son of the old king, he marries the princess and the trilogy closes. (until the author is persuaded to kidnap the child of this happy union and another quest ensues but that's another story - or it would be if any of these writers had the talent to tell more than one story.) If this doesn't sound too much like *The Lord Of The Rings*, think about the various sub-plots involving Aragorn. I recommend an essay by M John Harrison from *New Worlds Quarterly*, entitled "Out of Tennyson by Disney" in which the author calmly, reasonably and forcefully trashes Tolkien's opus as lacking substance, hackneyed and ultimately trite. I felt somewhat hurt, almost betrayed, the first time I read this after maybe a dozen re-readings of *The Lord of the Rings*, but as I read some of the other works Harrison uses in his case I began to see the truth of it. Years later and many hack trilogies on, I see Hattersley's point too. In Tolkien's two principal novels the hobbits leave home for foreign lands, have adventures and return to minor problems which are soon resolved in time for tea by the fireside in their slippers with a pipe and life goes on as normal. This may be very reassuring to a generation who can

readily remember going off to war (either WWII or Vietnam) but it induces a complacency which is very dangerous, as dangerous as the jingoism of tabloid newspapers.

Elsewhere fantasy takes somebody else's myths at surface value and sends the same all-american boy, the same dependable, amiable peasant lad out on the same quests. Oh sometimes the lad grows breasts and has a girl's name, but usually one she can disguise as a boy's for she's never particularly buxom either, but it all goes down the same way. Life at home is dull but safe, abroad there are adventures, and afterwards home is where the hearth(h) is.

And then, there are fantasies which are really mainstream novels because the "fantastic" element is actually an event that the character experiencing it must justly be expected to believe in reality. For instance, in Michaela Roessner's excellent aboriginal novel *Walkabout Woman* the young aborigine woman believes in the Dreamtime, she believes in the spirits, and thus when they speak to her, when she enters the Dreaming, it is reality. It is consensus - it doesn't matter that the reader doesn't ordinarily believe, what is necessary is that the reader understands that though it may be delusory, for the character it is real. Again however this involves an alien culture for its alleged fantasy. In other novels, the other land might be the mind, the nightmare of a young girl in Patricia Geary's *Strange Toys* or many of Philip K Dick's works.

There is a great deal more to fantasy, of course, than the Tolkienists, Colin Greenland puts forward the view that Lewis Carroll might be a better model; I'd suggest that everything which exists outside our everyday existence becomes fantasy. Shakespeare's Hamlet is a fantasy with ghosts, Jeanette Winterson's novels include multiple past realities, William Gibson's *Count Zero* involves voodoo gods within an alternate reality called cyberspace (which Harry Harrison endeavoured to relate to the soul), and Tim Powers uses the past and literature itself as interactive foreign lands. It all comes back to Roy Hattersley's remark: Fantasy is about somewhere else. In which case, we have package holidays to Benidorm as the standard fantasy trilogy, or we have uncharted territories to explore. Each has its value, but I know that having been to

Benidorm once, I see no point in going again every year.

Boyd Parkinson Quits

Boyd Parkinson who has co-edited this magazine with me for the last 10 issues resigned after completing the last issue, due to pressure of work.

Over the last two years I've received dozens of letters which include complimentary remarks about **Vector's** appearance. At conventions, people say similar things. It is always nice to be praised, but it ought to go to the right person.

When Boyd and I were brought together with the intention of editing **Vector** we dabbled in various production methods, but eventually Boyd determined that for the magazine to look the way we wanted it needed to be done using his DTP facilities, and from that point on all design and production work was controlled by Boyd. The excellent results he achieved were the result of many all-night sessions, a lot of hard work and some very good ideas.

Of course we still discussed **Vector's** layouts - I had my own thoughts, but in the main, I liked Boyd's ideas and all credit should be his. He worked hard, often under difficult conditions and without him I wouldn't have managed one issue let alone 10 stylish and attractive magazines.

Thank you Boyd.

As of this issue, Catie Cary, who has been one of our production assistants over the last two years, will be taking over from Boyd.

Letters

On Spec

From Craig Marnock

Just a short note on **Vector 159**. Of the three main articles, I enjoyed the Gibson/Sterling "Homo-Eroticism ..." the most. It's a pity the fire alarm went off and put paid to a very fun and interesting conversation.

As for the other two pieces: In his "Cyber- and some other - Spatial Metaphors", K V Bailey writes that "Speculation", as in speculative fiction, shares origins with Latin *speculator* (= observer) and *speculum* (=mirror). So too does the word specious, which accurately describes his article. Bailey is clearly intelligent and well-read, but this does not translate into an intelligible or coherent argument. The only "space" where this pseud rambling stuff might possibly make sense is the one between his ears.

The same could not be said of Simon Ings' article ("Flabby Engineering"). Whether you take the view that he is bravely jeopardising his career by speaking out like this, or that he is publicly knifing his competition in a very gentlemanly way, his article is well conceived and clearly written and was a pleasure to read.

Craig Marnock
Castle Douglas

Reviewing

From James McLean

I have been following the interesting arguments concerning reviewing and reviewers that have been published in **Vector** and feel that a key point has been missed.

In **Vector 157**, Ken Lake seemed to shoot himself in the foot by saying, " (when you) 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 contents."

Fine and well. This is what a review should be: A balanced (objective) view. However he then goes on to say, " I have begged Paul Kincaid or Andy Sawyer to send me this or that title because I feel I shall have something helpful to say about it."

Where is the balanced view here? Surely a reviewer should not adopt the attitude, "Oh, I liked that book, let me review it. I can do it justice." How can they believe that it will be a true representation of the book?

Simply put, they can't. So what is the reviewer thinking? Perhaps

they imagine it was expected of them to comment on a book in a certain way, which is where we start wading into the murky waters of Reputation.

It should be recognised that if a reviewer shouts opinions long and loud enough they will attract a reputation and herein lies the problem: Once the reputation is achieved, is the reviewer still offering a balanced opinion or are they pandering to their reputation? Was that put down of a book warranted by the reviewer, or was it said because it was *expected* from the reputation they have built up?

Naturally reviewers pick up a following; they *are* a guide to deciding when to purchase or not. If a reader agrees with a reviewer's comments on previous books they will trust that opinion in the future and similarly if they don't agree then they won't believe the opinion offered. The skill of the reviewer is to work at all times in a limbo of objectivity to do the job required of them. With the loss of objectivity - the failure to control their subjectivity - the reviewer becomes impotent, their reviews are ignored by the majority because no matter how valid they may be, they are now pandering to an audience of like minded people and will be of no concern to the rest.

This is by no means an attack on Ken and I do not suggest for a moment he is in this category, rather, this is a fact of life for all reviewers. The ability to control their subjectivity and not to let it reflect in their writing is a constant priority if the review is to serve its function.

How do we control it? This seems to be a mixture of integrity on the part of the reviewer and the ability of the editor to make sure it is not permitted in the pages of their publication.

James McLean
Aberdeen

Apology

Ken Lake has alerted us to a typo in his review of "The Orbit Science Fiction Yearbook 3" in **Vector 160**.

We printed:

"... with Aldiss actually citing the Ceausescu fiasco and setting out to argue against 'arguments' and argument demolished by the Iraqi explosion."

The correct text is:

"... with Aldiss actually citing the Ceausescu fiasco and setting out to argue against 'armaments' an argument demolished already by the Iraqi explosion."

Our apology to all concerned.

Please send all letters of comment to:

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This Interview was conducted before an audience at Chronoclasm in Derby, June 1990, Kev speaks first....

After writing three elegant fantasies, what did your editor say when you said I'm going to do a space opera?

Her eyes lit up, I have a wonderful editor, her name is Jane Johnson, she's very patient with me. She's very patient with the idiosyncrasies of all her authors.

Your previous books have all been quiet. *Plenty* is raucous.

People say this, that my books are quiet. I don't know, to me there seem to be lots of explosions and avalanches and people charging around with guns. My previous books have been short, that's true; and they take place in an imaginary past when there weren't so many people around, and not so many noisy machines. This time I wanted to write one which was big and loud and colourful and with a sense of crowded space. I think if you're going to write a space opera there's got to be loud music.

The spaceship is called the Alice Liddell, after the girl who was the inspiration for *Alice in Wonderland*. You said the other night in the quiz that she's one of your great heroes.

Well, you said what book would I be if I were a book and I said I'd have to be *Alice in Wonderland*.

I didn't realise this until quite recently, but everything I write turns into some kind of version of *Alice*. When I was writing fantasy, I was always at odds with the great majority of fantasy writers because they all seemed to take their inspiration from Tolkien. It never seemed to me that his was the definitive form of fantasy. The fantasy tradition is much older and more capacious and more varied than you would think to look around the shelves now. If we have to derive fantasy from the work of an Oxford don, I can't see why it shouldn't be Lewis Carroll instead of J R R Tolkien.

I do feel a certain affinity for *Alice in Wonderland*, it seems to me it's a very good model for life as I live it and as I think a lot of people live it. We are all struggling through a world that is pretty chaotic, and nonsensical. We're surrounded by these grotesque and eccentric authority figures, all making impossible demands of us all the time and insisting on battering us with their insistent logic. Then, as soon as we've learnt the rules, they change them. Also *Alice's* identity is in question. She says she seems to have been so many different sizes since she got up that morning, she wonders whether she's still the same person. I feel that too.

In *The Hour of the Thin Ox*, my second book and *Other Voices*, my third) two women - who were stuck in that sort of quandary and finally had to take a stand, do something convulsive and

possibly violent to resolve these impossible contradictions. When I realised this, I realised I was halfway through writing another one, only this time it was *Alice in Space*. Tabitha is a sort of *Alice* figure. She's suspicious, she's obstinate, she's not the most rational person in the world. She doesn't necessarily make the decisions that would be sensible while she's trying to protect herself and her ship. I thought, having finally realised what I'd been doing for ten years, I should make a little acknowledgement of it and name the ship in honour of Alice Liddell.

There's a sense, especially in *Plenty* of all these magnificent and wonderful things happening that people don't have time to realise at the time how wonderful they are and afterwards they think "Damn I wish I'd noticed that then"

I think life's a little like that Kev. I wanted a book full of wonders and marvels and strangenesses and exotic colourful things, but I didn't want what you get in world-building fiction, where the author has sat down and planned the entire world and written the languages and the history and everything before even starting on the story. It's always so rationalised. Like the character you get in utopian books who says to the protagonist "Hello and welcome to the twenty-first century. Let me explain our society to you". Nobody has ever offered to explain our society to me - or in fact, everybody has offered to explain our society to me and no two explanations match.

To me the world is very puzzling, confusing and I'm not at all sure that any logic can explain everything. Yet in order to live here, I have to take it for granted. I have to pass through the world as if it were a perfectly rational place, full of predictable things, things I've been promised that will actually take place - as if there were some kind of contract binding us all together. We have to make everything around us banal and ordinary in order to survive at all, otherwise we would collapse in wonder. In fact people do, people sit in shop doorways talking to themselves because they've suddenly been struck by the truth, the extraordinary inexplicability of everything and they spend the rest of their lives explaining it to themselves.

I couldn't see why you couldn't have a space opera universe that people actually lived in, a colourful, expansive but also grotty, shop-worn, tired, battered sort of universe. A universe that was not convenient for the people living in it. Urban sprawl has spread out into orbit, Mars is getting crowded and the flash people with lots of money go out and live in the asteroids - not actually that much different from living in this world now.

Thinking of people talking to themselves; running through *Take Back Plenty* is a series of conversations that Tabitha has with the Alice about people she's met, places she's been....

"I couldn't see why you couldn't have a space opera universe that people actually lived in, a colourful, expansive but also grotty, shop-worn, tired, battered sort of universe."

Colin Greenland
Interviewed by Kev McVeigh

What's the worst job you ever had? Yes, whenever I start a book I always come up with something incredibly complicated and difficult to do. I always have a sort of architectural notion of the book and then I always get into the details far too soon and start complicating the architecture to the point where it will not hold up. That's one of the things I rely on my editor for. She patiently talks me down from this kind of frenzy of creative obsession to the level at which I can actually write the thing and that people will actually be able to read it.

When I was planning *Plenty* I had a big canvas with a lot of things going on, lots of different people everywhere, different races, alien and human, far more stuff than I was going to be able to fit into the plot. All that was a growing pile of notes languishing over on one side, and on the other side was stuff about Tabitha and what a loner she is, she works alone in space and lives in her ship. Her ship is her entire life. After a little while I realised that her ship has a personality of its own.

All the ships in this system have a computer persona, like a development of Hal in 2001, an artificial somebody who comes between the captain and the hardware and who exists in the form of a cassette thing that you plug into the cockpit. There actually is an Alice and she is Tabitha's only friend. Tabitha and Alice are a team, Tabitha is completely dependant on Alice, who is older than her and more sensible and knows her way around better than Tabitha does though Tabitha does the best she can. I began to hear them talking to each other in the long lonely reaches of the boring trek from Mars to the asteroids. Tabitha plays blues very badly on her harmonica and watches movies and chats with Alice.

Then I realised that as so often happens when you're writing, the two problems actually solved each other. Now I had a place in the book where I could put all the lovely things that I knew were going on outside the plot, all the wonderful, strange, bizarre, frightening, funny places and things that the plot didn't reach.

Also I could tell something about Tabitha's background. Tabitha was born on the Moon which is very boring, all routines and rotas like a perpetual girl guide camp. Tabitha had to get away from that, and she did by a very strange route of her own. It occurred to me that there was no way that Tabitha ought to be owning her own ship. She was no way near rich enough or enterprising enough to get one. So bit by bit I began to piece together how she'd actually come by the Alice, how this team got together in the first place. All that I could slot in to the form of Tabitha's log, I asked Unwin to set those chapters in a different typeface, so that you can skip them if you want to. I think they enrich everything, but some people just want to get on with the story. That's okay.

So if Alice's persona is something like a cassette that you plug in to the ship, if she'd been left alone in the junkyard for a few months would she have turned

into the Best of Queen?

No, no, no, Alice is not Best of Queen. She's best of a lot of things, though... I play music constantly when I'm writing. I put on a pair of headphones and play the same thing over and over again to create the right atmosphere. There's a lot of very peculiar music that's gone into the making of this plot but no Queen.

One of your books, quotes the Couteau Twins I think doesn't it?

Oh Yes. I started playing the Couteaux when I was writing *Thin Ox*, all the way through *Other Voices* into *Plenty*. *Other Voices* was the prime moment when I was most obsessed with 4AD bands, the Couteau Twins, Wolfgang Press and especially Dead Can Dance, and also some early New Order: dark gloomy but exhilarating Goth music, like early Cure. All the chapter titles in *Other Voices* are quotes from them. I took the phrase *Other Voices* from a track by the Cure and I now see that Paul Young has taken it from me for the title of his new album.

"To me, science fiction and fantasy are inevitably about our world. We don't have any other world to write about. However much we stretch, however much we make up and improvise, we've only got our own experience to draw on."

So apart from those, what were you listening to when writing *Plenty*, which isn't gloomy at all?

I was playing A Secret Wish by Propaganda, that was very good, that kind of noisy, mechanical, post-modern German Romanticism was perfect. I was playing the Pet Shop Boys a lot which surprised me because I don't usually play things that are as lyrical as they are, but there was something about their mood - the kind of urban cold space that their music seems to define almost effortlessly - that I felt was something like the unfriendly urban worlds that Tabitha was passing through. But I was also playing a lot of Mozart and Vivaldi - a lot of baroque music altogether, things that were very neat and precise and regular and reliable. While I was struggling to find the next word and the whole plot was melting down around me I could lean back on Mozart and feel that somebody

somewhere had it all under control, even if it wasn't me.

Does anybody else have any questions?

[Audience:] Tabitha is very real, and you talk about her as though she was alive....

Tabitha was the first part of this book that arrived. I usually start with a person in a situation; the situation is a problem; then I realise where she is, an exotic setting. Then I build the plot out from there. I was in hospital about eight or ten years ago and suddenly I had Tabitha in my head, I didn't know all about her but I knew her at once. After that comes the problem of trying to turn that person into words. I don't know if it's successful or not until somebody reads it and tells me they believe in her.

The best moment for me so far was when Jane's assistant, Patsy Antoine, was reading the proof at the publishers. Patsy is the best assistant in the business. She's actually reliable and bright and sensible and all the things editors assistants are employed not to be. They're generally employed to be obstructive and vague to protect the editors. Patsy doesn't read a lot of science fiction and she wouldn't have read *Plenty* if it hadn't been her job. I popped into the office one day when she was getting near the end, and I said "How's it going? How does it look?" and she said "It's fine"; and then she said "That Tabitha, she puts up with a lot doesn't she? I couldn't do that, I couldn't handle the things she does." At that moment I realised the magic had worked. Somehow I'd put squiggly black marks on paper that made Tabitha alive for somebody else.

I've thought about the question of being a man writing women. It never actually feels like a problem. When people asked me I used to say: "Science fiction is about the leap of the imagination and for a man the biggest leap of the imagination is to imagine being a woman." The last time I heard myself saying that, I thought it sounded like pompous bullshit and it simply wasn't true.

I've since thought of something more interesting, following on from *Alice in Wonderland*. The central characters in my books are often people who are not in power. The world is being run by somebody else and not for their benefit. Jillian in *Thin Ox* and Princess Netta in *Other Voices* are people who should have power, they ought to be in charge of their own lives and in fact other people's lives. But somehow they've been displaced. They're marginalised by their societies and they have to compensate for that, constantly, daily. I think, politically, that's the position of women in our society and I wonder if there might be an element of that in choosing to write about people who suffer the universe rather than determining it; but it's not planned that way. Each time, it's just a person.

[Audience]: Would you like to live in your space opera universe?

I already do. I think the answer is: No, but I can't help it.

To me, science fiction and fantasy are inevitably about our world. We don't have any other world to write about. However much we stretch, however much we make up and improvise, we've only got our own experience to draw on.

If you look back, you can see it. Nothing dates faster than the future. The fictional futures that people have created in the past are very clear, transparent descriptions of the world they were living in and the expectations they had. I don't regret that, I think that's just fine. I think that science fiction is a lovely way, a very powerful way of writing about the world we've got. Escapism is fine too, escape is one of the primary reasons for reading books at all, if not the central reason. We pick up a book to take a break from the boredom or the practical demands of the world around us. Fiction may be lies, but those lies inevitably reflect back to you what the author knew and what you know. I may not choose the world that I've got but I am here; we are in it.

[Audience]: I get the feeling that the book has been growing for some time Tabitha grew up in that hospital bed.

Yeah. She's grown more and more detailed. At first I just knew that there was this woman, I knew roughly what she looked like, and what she was like; I knew she had a spaceship. I knew she was not a hero, she was not glamorous, you could pass her in the street. You do pass her in the street, every day, and you don't even notice her. She's just somebody who drives a truck. When did Brazil come out, does anybody know? '84? I have a firm suspicion that some of Tabitha Jute was crystallised unconsciously when I saw Brazil, which was a very Colin Greenland kind of movie, yeah?. It echoed a lot of my assumptions and my style and my fascinations. Watching it again recently was quite perplexing. I didn't realise how closely Tabitha was modelled after the truck driver in Brazil. I can't remember her name, she seemed a terrific character and I think she put some of the edges, the definition on Tabitha.

The first story about Tabitha I wrote in hospital. It was a bit silly and a bit slow getting to the point. It was published in one form in *The Fiction Magazine*. They liked it very much, but a lot of people didn't. Then I had another go at her, another short story. That one was weird, it was sort of *film noir*, it was sort of clumsy cyberpunk and it was also *Dan Dare* - it was a lot of different things that I liked, I was trying to get them all into the one story. A lot of people felt that it didn't really hang together. I took it to the SF writers' workshop at Milford and was told in no uncertain terms by everybody there that it didn't work.

A lot of people, not just Bruce Sterling told me that you couldn't actually write space opera. When I started all this space opera was terribly unfashionable. Nobody was writing it, nobody was reading it. Nobody believed that you could write a human space opera. I had arguments about it. People told me it was a reactionary form and there was nothing you could do about it; it was a trivial form and there was nothing you could do about that. You couldn't have real characters in a space opera and you couldn't say anything that made sense politically in a space opera.

No one really convinced me this was true. The great example I held on to through that phase was *The Centauri Device* by M. John Harrison which I thought was a perfect example of what I was dreaming of. One day I spoke to Mike Harrison about it and he scowled at me and said, "That book is a failure. It's a complete mess from start to finish."

"While I was struggling to find the next word and the whole plot was melting down around me I could lean back on Mozart and feel that somebody somewhere had it all under control, even if it wasn't me."

So I thought the only thing to do was to sit down and write the space opera proper, not to try and do any more short stories but to write the big book, because one thing space opera simply must be and that is *spacious*. This was an appalling thing for me, because I find writing very hard and my previous two books had been quite short. They're bigger on the inside than on the outside but there are not that many words in them. The words there are were very carefully chosen.

The prospect of writing a great big book with lots and lots of words in and lots of plot was exhausting, but all the while that I was doing it, all the while that I was messing around and replanning the architecture and tearing it down and starting again there were two things constant in the middle of it.

There was Tabitha, who hasn't changed since day one. I know her a good deal better, I know her past a great deal better, but she is still the same person she was when she first walked into that hospital.

And there was the ship. Now the name of the ship changed several times before I realised that she had to be called the *Alice Liddell*; and there was more to her than I imagined; but they were the two things, the team, that I could rely on while I was building this chaotic freewheeling universe around them. No matter how lost I got, I could always go back to them and find out what they felt about things. They would always tell me.

[Audience]: Did they ever tell you things you didn't want to hear?

Many times, many, many times

[Audience]: Listening to you reading aloud, you lapse into other people's voices very easily and just talking about Mike Harrison there, you did a very good Mike Harrison impression. Do you act the characters to yourself?

No, I don't, but well I do sometimes actually yes. I hear them in my head. It's always a movie. Sometimes it's 3D, sometimes I'm actually there sort of disembodied, inside the character or just behind her head. I just write down what they say and then I hear it again, maybe slightly more clearly and then I rewrite it. I do act sometimes when I'm looking for the right word or often how to describe a gesture. Like when Marco is pawing Tabitha: "Tabitha patted the air between them with the palms of her hands." "Off" she said. I might sit at my desk and perform the action to try and find the words. But I don't stroll around and pick fights with people in order to find out how fights work. I make it all up, I'm afraid.



1990: the five best books

Compiled by Chris Amies

As in previous years, **Vector's** reviewers were canvassed for their selection of the best books of the previous year. Naturally, any league table is suspect because just how many new titles come your way? Most of us, unless the book comes through for review, wait until the paperback comes out or the hardback appears in the library. But for fans of points scored, 1990 has a winner. And it's **space opera**. Huh? No cyberpunks, no virtual reality? Already honoured as winner of the Arthur C Clarke and BSFA Awards, Colin Greenland's **Take Back Plenty** comes in first with 6 votes. Next comes yet another space-faring tale, Iain M Banks' **Use of Weapons**, with five. Then scoring three each are

Queen of Angels by Greg Bear, **Rats and Gargoyles** by Mary Gentle, **Hyperion** by Dan Simmons, and **Foucault's Pendulum** by Umberto Eco. However, Mary Gentle picks up another vote for **Scholars and Soldiers**, and Terry Pratchett gets five votes - one each for **Wyrd Sisters**, **Moving Pictures** and **Eric**, and two for the collaboration with Neil Gaiman, **Good Omens**. In all I counted 90 books voted for, though some mentions were votes, some were lead-ins to the naming of the favoured.

And here's what people said...

K.V. Bailey

Normally antipathic to novels about semi-anthropomorphic animals, I liked Gary Kilworth's **Midnight's Sun**, found its wolfish characters compelling, and appreciated its insights into how animals may relate to environment (man included). Encountering wolves of a different coat in Brian Stableford's **The Werewolves of London**, I thought this the year's most ambitious - or most fantastic - example of a proliferating history-manipulating sub-genre. Such extravagantly imaginative versions of the past manifest, I suspect, a 'late' collective (Faustian) syndrome - a wish to relive or amend it. **Foucault's Pendulum** by Umberto Eco (first paperback edition 1990) also is a wonderful exploration of crypto-history, a ludic post-modern journey through esoteric, metaphysical and philosophical labyrinths. As the pendulum's plane of swing circles, so do burlesque, mystery, suspense and speculation chase each other round. I enjoyed it for these delights and for the bonus of affectionate, often funny, remembrances of life in rural Italy. Colin Greenland's **Take Back Plenty** rates high for sheer surface exuberance, as well as for the sophisticated allusive and parodic critique underlying all that space-theatre, and especially for the inset tales told by Tabitha to Alice. Most stimulating non-fiction was **The Rebirth of Nature**, Rupert Sheldrake's latest contribution to the heretical evolutionary revolution, genre-relevant in many ways - e.g. in his relating of the Gaia hypothesis to 'morphic field' theory and in his interpretation of the Frankenstein myth.

David V Barrett

To save space, let's assume the top three in this year's Clarke Award (**Take Back Plenty** - Colin Greenland; **Rats and Gargoyles** - Mary Gentle; **The City, Not Long After** - Pat Murphy). Plus stunning discoveries I've only made this year, so I can't count them here: Gael Baudino's achingly beautiful **Strands of Starlight** and **Gossamer Axe**, and Ellen Kushner's brilliant **Thomas The Rhymer**.

Charles de Lint's **Moonheart** and

Yarrow are powerful and warming fantasies, each linking a solidly realised present-day Ottawa with a strange, beautiful and sometimes terrifying mythic Other Place. Robert Charles Wilson's **Gypsies** and **The Divide** are utterly real psychological novels; the first dealing with parallel worlds, the second with induced schizophrenia, both in original and emotionally satisfying ways for such well-trodden themes.

I finally read Diana Wynne Jones' **Fire and Hemlock** last year; it felt like meeting an old friend for the first time. Disturbing, frightening, warm, enticing, and compulsory reading for anyone who still thinks children's books are just for kids. For the first hundred pages of AA Attanasio's **The Last Legends of Earth** I hated it for being so opaque; for the next hundred I grumbled; for the last two hundred I knew this was an absolute classic of wide-angle time-and-space fiction. Persevere.

And Jeanette Winterson's **Oranges are Not the Only Fruit** because it hurts so much; I've known too many people scarred like that.

Martin H Brice

Misery by Stephen King: an author, crippled in a car accident, is rescued by a devoted fan - who then holds him prisoner until he writes the book she wants. Possible reality rather than fantasy - and the most frightening book I've read this year.

Doctor Who: 25 Glorious Years by Peter Haining. A complete pictorial compendium. I found it fascinating reading even though I've never seen a **Dr Who** programme right through.

The Mask by Dean R Koontz. A story of ominous reincarnation. This man is an incredible author. It is the only book I've ever read in which mere ink marks on paper made me jump as though I really had heard it in my own house.

Red Thirst, David Pringle (Ed.) A **Warhammer** collection inspired by fantasy role-playing. The action rattles along; a darn good read - it really takes you out of yourself.

Dragon Wing by Margaret Weis and Tracy Hickman. My best book of the year. Well written, thought-provoking, a lot of laughs, a lot of adventures. What fantasy fiction is all about.

Terry Broome

None of my choices this year came close to the standards set last year, partly because I had less time to read non-review books and partly because of the appalling drop in standards of the books I did receive. Perhaps this is simply a false impression any jaded reviewer of fantasy trilogies will pick up after several years, but personally I think the stagnant pool conservatively polluting the heart of the fantasy field is beginning to stink.

Here, then, is my list of the most pleasant books of 1990:

Charles de Lint's distinguished series about Tamson House, beginning with **Moonheart**, is that rare, refreshing thing - a fantasy which doesn't stink. Jack Womack similarly adds his own personal touch to his Ambient novels (**Ambient**, **Terriplane**, **Heathen**), enriching the SF field with some thought and invention.

Two novels comprising shorter stories,

Frederik Pohl's **The Day The Martians Came** and Mike Resnick's **Ivory**, are slight, rather familiar tales, simply told, but told well.

Finally, Anthony Burgess's **Any Old Iron** uses the sword Excalibur as a plot device upon which to hang an otherwise non-fantastic tale. Amusing, if slow to start and overlong, it shows a sharp wit dulled by tiredness.

Barbara Davies

Fly By Night by Jenny Jones, volume 1 of a series but complete in itself, concerns a woman's adventures in another, magical world. It is different from the usual fantasy - no elves or orcs here - and a refreshing change.

Traditional fantasy is covered in **The Dragonbone Chair** by Tad Williams, another volume 1. This book infuriatingly stops dead, loose ends dangling. It starts slowly but builds up a cracking pace before its infuriating ending.

Tehanu by Ursula LeGuin is a return to Earthsea by an older, wiser author. It is aimed at a more adult readership than her original trilogy and deals with more adult themes.

Hyperion by Dan Simmons is a mixture of **The Canterbury Tales**, horror and SF. Full of ideas: Treachery; Time Tombs; The Shrike, a stomach-turning alien. I found it compelling.

The Ultimate Guide To Science Fiction by David Pringle is the equivalent of **Halliwel's Film Guide**. I'm not yet sure if I agree with the author's assessments, but I intend to use its 4-star awards as a recommended reading list.

Valerie Housden

I don't remember reading anything in the SF or Fantasy field over the past year that really grabbed me, so I'll start with the crime novel that did. **March Violets** by Philip Kerr is a private detective story set in Berlin in 1938. Told in the first person using Berlin dialect literally translated but with such skill that a non-linguist would have no difficulty understanding it, he evokes a real feeling of time and place. My only criticism is with the ending. His streetwise detective is a winner who loses, which left this reader uneasy. I know it's a cliché, but I would like to see Mr Kerr try a WWII alternate history novel. He would tackle it from an interesting angle, I'm sure.

Of the genre books, **Good Omens** by Terry Pratchett and Neil Gaiman was worth buying in hardback and was funny even though I did not read the **William** books as a child. I also enjoyed **Moving Pictures** by Terry Pratchett, which had some wonderfully visual jokes as well as milking all our favourite cinema clichés to good effect.

Colin Greenland's **Take Back Plenty** marked a welcome comeback for space fiction with a strong central female character, believable aliens and a good plot. Finally, **Expecting Someone Taller** by Tom Holt, a late twentieth century reworking of **The Edda** after Wagner, proved to be wonderfully funny without being annoying or facile.

LJ Hurst

Two authors each account for two books of my selection.

The first is Philip K Dick, for **The Days of Perky Pat** and **The Little Black Box**, which were the fourth and the fifth volumes in the Complete Short Stories. The unhappy thing about the arrival of those books was knowing there could be no more.

The other author is JG Ballard, for **War Fever**, a collection of short stories, some of them inexplicably missed from previous collections; and for **The Atrocity Exhibition**. This is Re/Search's new illustrated edition, with additional notes by Ballard on his original text. It is not, though, the original lost **Exhibition**, pulped by its American publishers before publication.

The Study of Popular Fiction: A Source Book edited by Bob Ashley was a good critical anthology that came out last year, looking at generic fiction in general. It has only been in the last year or so that bookshops have had plentiful copies of critical works by Advent Publishers, and I've been knocked out to read books like Damon Knight's **In Search of Wonder** and William Atheling's **Issues At Hand**, that for years I had only heard about.

Edward James

Top of the list, somewhat reluctantly, I put the **Hyperion** novels by Dan Simmons. They were enormous fun to read, particularly the first, with its various "Canterbury Tales" told by the Shrike pilgrims: packed full of images and mind-boggling SFnal concepts. After the roller-coaster ride was over, I began to wonder if it just wasn't all too much of a game for me; a playful, though very successful, juggling of SF tropes, packaged and hyped in such a way as to look like serious SF, but ultimately pretty hollow inside. I had no such problems with Colin Greenland's **Take Back Plenty**, which was sheer fun from beginning to end. Nor with Sheri S Tepper's **Grass**, which was most impressed by (particularly as before I had associated her with competent but lightweight and whimsical fantasy). Next, I was bowled over by Schuiten and Peeters' **bande dessinée** volume called **La Tour**. I discovered them while doing some work in Paris: their **La Fille d'Urbicande** and **Les Murailles de Samaris** are equally good - fine drawing in a sort of neo-Edwardian style, superbly realised fantasy towns, and wonderfully surrealistic plots, crying out for translation (Titan Books, please note). For the fifth book, I am not sure there are too many justifying to get in, and too many I have probably forgotten reading. I did enjoy "Jack Yeovil's **Drachenfels**, though...

Tom A Jones

The Best of the Nebulas edited by Ben Bova was good, some old favourites and some fine stories I hadn't read before. Not a bad story in the book. Terry Pratchett is one of the few people who can write broad humour and get more laughs than groans. In 1990 I read **Wyrd Sisters**; the plot scarcely matters, it's funny.

Staying with humour, I enjoyed Barry Pilton's **One Man and his Bog**, the "true" story of his walk along the Pennine Way. They say that pain and misfortune make the best comedy.

Tom Clancy seems the best techno-

thriller writer at present. **Clear And Present Danger** recognised glasnost killed the traditional East/West confrontation and turns to drug cartels.

Finally a TV script, for the BBC "Horizon" programme **The Day The Earth Melted**. The theory discussed seems to provide a plausible answer to the question: where does all the molten rock come from in volcanic activity if the Earth's mantle is solid?

Paul Kincald

This has been one of those years when it has been easy to find five books; I suspect I could as easily have made it ten.

Take Back Plenty - Colin Greenland, simply because of its exuberance, and its fresh play with some of the oldest clichés in Science Fiction.

Queen of Angels - Greg Bear, which would probably have topped the list in any other year. One of my least favourite writers in the genre suddenly comes and knocks me flat with a staggeringly brilliant novel about the nature of identity and intelligence.

Use of Weapons - Iain M. Banks: a controlled and perpetually inventive space opera married with the sort of dark personal concerns which made **The Vamp Factory** and **The Bridge** so good.

Digital Dreams - David V. Barrett (Ed.) - okay, I'm in it, but that doesn't stop it being a collection of some very good stories indeed, especially the one from John Gard. Finally, **The Stress of Her Regard** - Tim Powers, which manages to tie together the real biographies of Byron, Shelley and Keats with a fresh approach to vampire lore in a way which is original and highly entertaining.

Honourable mentions to Jonathan Carroll's **Black Cocktail**, Jack Finney's **Time And Again** - one of my great rediscoveries of the year - and anything by Howard Waldrop - whose books don't actually fit into the 1990 catchment area, but that doesn't stop him being one of the best writers around.

Ken Lake

I always trail behind because I buy only paperbacks - and I have a 60-book backlog of those! But **The Collected Stories of Philip K Dick** continues to head my list of unmissables, and I was pleased to welcome Brian Aldiss' two-part **A Man in His Time** and **A Romance of the Equator**, his own choice of his best SF and Fantasy.

The discovery of **Author's Choice Monthly** was my big 1990 event, with Spider Robinson's issue no. 9 the best - stories from the remarkable 1985 **Melancholy Elephants** collection.

Lois McMaster Bujold continues her superb **Barraber** series - the novel of that title will appear in **Analog** this year - while Terry Pratchett's Discworld still provides the best humour of the year. I have to mention Arthur C Clarke's evocative and informative **Astounding Days** as a must for all trufen, but beg your indulgence to squeeze in the best one-off novel of 1990, Ian Watson's **The Files of Memory**, spoiled for me only by a cop-out ending but otherwise a tour de force.

All in all, another vintage year despite UK publishing upheavals: roll on 1992 and the free European Market!

Kev McVeigh

From a year when I read around 250 books, picking five isn't easy. Some, like Colin Greenland's revisionist space-opera **Take Back Plenty** or Mary Gentle's post-modernist political fantasy **Rats & Gargoyles** have received well-deserved plaudits already. There are authors who stand out because, having first discovered them this year, I read all I could find - Pat Murphy, Richard Grant and Terry Bisson (see V158). The best books, however, were these:

Sexing the Cherry - Jeanette Winterson. A crazy historical melange of time, sexuality, and fruit, which contains real princesses, and a wonderful cheery attitude.

Living in Ether and Strange Toys - Patricia Geary. The David Lynch of contemporary SF? As Winterson writes the best Fantasy outside the genre, Geary writes the best mainstream fiction within. You may have trouble finding the disturbing first novel, would some publisher please rectify this at once?

Leap Year - Steve Erickson. The American Dream deconstructed, through a fascinating account of the 1988 US elections.

Full Spectrum 2. The best original anthology, with KS Robinson, Bear Bryant, McIntyre, and Swanwick, plus at least four debutants amongst its 544 pages.

Queendom Come - Ellen Galford. Hilarious satire in which Albanna, legendary queen of the Scots, does the Arthurian time-of-trouble act with a little help from her high-priestess/lover Gwydhylis. A glorious romp through Edinburgh and contemporary politics ensues.

Nik Morton

A good year, nary a poor book of the hundred I read in 1990. I now understand why **Perfume** by Patrick Suskind has continued to be a best seller; it's unlike any book I've read in its subject matter, its realisation of a time and place long gone yet powerfully evoked, with a memorable character who will rank among the greats of literature. **Cloudrock** by Garry Kilworth is a slim yet finely crafted volume, involving me in a closed society, with mysticism and wonder, love and valour. **The Fifth Child** by Doris Lessing was a cunning work, continually switching sympathies between the fifth child and his mother, a battle of wills so all-consuming, so terrible that I came away feeling drained. **The Rainbow Gate** by Freda Warrington confirmed my earlier hopes that she is emerging as a formidable novelist, already in command of dark romance and blighted love. And it's a tie for fifth place between **The Adams Chronicles** (DC Comics, by Peter David, with art by Esteban Moroto, a centuries-spanning story in full colour, beautifully illustrated, encompassing love, treachery, honour, adventure, humour, pathos, passion and poignancy), and **The Magician's Wife** by Jerome Charyn, illustrated by Fran ois Bouc (Titan Books' colourful mystery graphic novel in four chapters, where magic and surrealism meet, where love and devotion can be warped and be cleansed: an uncomfortable, memorable love story).

John Newsinger

Very difficult to get my selection down to five. In the end it meant leaving out novels by Patricia Geary, John Brunner, Tanith Lee,

Robert Charles Wilson and Ann Halam... but five it is. First on my list is Paul Park's astonishing **Sugar Rain**, the second volume of his Starbridge Chronicles. Charn is plunged into bloody revolution and Charity and Thanakar Starbridge flee their separate ways to safety. There has been nothing like this masterpiece of imaginative literature since Gene Wolfe's **Book of the New Sun**. The rest are in no particular order.

I thoroughly enjoyed Pat Murphy's **The City, Not Long After**. This is a benign hippy fantasy of love and peace triumphing over American style militarism that was made all the more poignant by the wholesale slaughter of the Gulf War. Next KW Jeter's **Farewell Horizontal**, a marvelously inventive satire that reminded me why I read Science Fiction. Then Ian McDonald's **Out On Blue Six**. Tremendous stuff, wonderfully written, but was the Compassionate Society really the most obvious target for a novelist writing in the Thatcherite 1980s? The conclusion was a bit weak for my money.

Lastly the best children's book I read was without any doubt **The Final Reckoning**, the third volume of Robin Jarvis' Deptford Mice trilogy. This 300 page horror story with its sympathetic characters, powerful descriptive writing, lack of sentimentality and gripping story kept the whole family enthralled.

Cecil Nurse

I read quite a lot this year, mostly new books, and enjoyed most of them. Five that stand out in my memory:

Death Arms by KW Jeter. Lean, aggressive, cynical, unrepentant, unpretentious fantasy, with attitude. I loved it.

Last Legends of Earth by AA Attanasio. The last of his 'tetrad', this one constructed around 'that inexorable mystery of change we call time'. For my money he managed to eff that ineffable, and set off a little soundless vibration in the pit of my stomach.

Dreams of an Unseen Planet by Teresa Plowright. A first novel, taking on the concept of a colony on another planet that finds itself infertile, unable to bring the next generation into being. I could read a sideways comment on our media-sex-driven culture, and on that deep sense of impending catastrophe that many of us live with. Understated and tantalising.

Carlton Comfort by Dan Simmons. A vast SF/Horror, far superior to his Hugo-winning **Hyperion**, in my opinion. Many levels of ghostliness, and at its heart some deep indignation at the abuses of power in our world.

The Electric Crocodile by DG Compton. A bit metaphysical, a bit paranoid. Cold, clear, and compulsive. A tatty 20-year-old paperback that hit me between the eyes. I don't think they write them like this any more.

Andy Sawyer

Why did I like so much during 1990? Am I growing charitable or what? I could easily write a top ten. Can't I even mention Colin Greenland or Ramsay Campbell? No? OK. Mary Gentle's **Rats And Gargoyles** headed my particular chart. Its audacious mixture of alternative Renaissance, Hermeticism, Higher Slapstick, and dark-baroque imagery is the stuff of which

classics are made. If I knew what was going on, I'd tell you; meanwhile don't ask what scribbled manuscripts are going on the fire in these parts. Damn you, Gentle, you got it right!

Just a whisker (oh dear!) behind came Iain M Banks' **Use of Weapons** for its hauntingly shocking inner-spiraling momentum and glorious wide-sweep action. **Heart of Darkness** as space opera. Mistah Banks - he terrified!

David Brin's **Earth** became more and more horribly appropriate as 1990 moved into 1991. It's the kind of warning novel that only good SF writers can do; neither fine writing nor deep characterisation, but the heart of the matter for those with eyes to see.

Dan Simmons' **Hyperion** satisfied my liking for big romantic far-future epics; each character has his own story in a sort of galactic **Canterbury Tales** set against a Keatsian background.

Finally, on an altogether different plane, comes David Thomson's **The People of the Sea**, a beautiful recapturing of Scottish and Irish seal stories and the people who told them, wonderfully crafted by both Thomson and his sources.

Maureen Speller

The annual revelation about what I failed to read comes round again. However, I read and enjoyed:

Rats and Gargoyles - Mary Gentle. This novel fascinates me, even though I don't understand the half of it, yet. Thank god for the bibliography.

Jurassic Park - Michael Crichton. Suddenly it's okay to write intelligently and have fun. **Jurassic Park** is a very clever piece of speculation and an interesting story. And ten out of ten for a neat cover.

Good Omens - Terry Pratchett and Neil Gaiman. Pratchett's whimsy tempered with Gaiman's darker vision produced one of the most satisfactory humorous books I've ever read.

Queen of Angels - Greg Bear. This was a **tour de force**, a futuristic crime novel coupled with an exploration of the nature of identity. Literary, absorbing, difficult to put down.

Wulfsyrm - Philip Mann. My book of the year. Another novel about identity and biography, and the relationships between alien species, between men and machines. Wonderful.

Non-SF book of the year - Peter Ackroyd's **Dickens** for its ability to turn a confirmed Dickens' hater into someone with a fascination for the man behind the novels. Tip for 1991 - Howard Waldrop's **Night of the Coasters** - wonderful.

Alex Stewart

Two of my choices are graphic albums. Neil Gaiman's **A Doll's House**, which collects the eponymous **Sandman** serial in book form, is a deft and witty blend of extreme weirdness and kick-ass metaphysics. Wonderful stuff.

Book two of **Barefoot Gen**, written and drawn by Keiji Nakazawa, seems technically crude by comparison, but has a raw emotional power that's desperately moving. A semi-autobiographical account of the immediate aftermath of the bombing of Hiroshima, and a triumphant affirmation of the resilience of the human spirit in the face

of overwhelming horror.

My token skiffy novel has to be **Use of Weapons**, Iain M Banks' most recent excursion into the culture. For me this works far better than his previous pure SF pieces, because the story itself is a human one, and the strange technology and exotic locations never draw undue attention to themselves.

Ramsey Campbell's bizarre novella **Needing Ghosts** unfolds with the remorseless paralogic of nightmare, wandering across the borderline between genre horror and postmodernist mainstream.

Finally, my vote for sheer fun goes to Kim "Jack Yeovil" Newman's **Demon Download**: a tongue-in-cheek kaleidoscope of post-cyberpunk techno-sleaze, Lovecraftian horror, gross-out violence, and ninja nuns. Now that's what I call entertainment.

Charles Stross

In 1990 I didn't get as much reading done as I wanted to, for varied reasons. I bought only one hardback novel - so I've yet to read two of the arrivals of 1990 I'm most looking forward to, Mary Gentle's **Rats and Gargoyles**, and **The Difference Engine**, by Gibson and Sterling.

Some of what I did read impressed me. **The Child Garden** by Geoff Ryman is about as near to perfection as any SF I've read for years, and will repay re-reading. **Foucault's Pendulum** by Umberto Eco has got to be one of the great con-tricks of the decade, a sort of literary intellectual's **Illuminatus!** overdone in one sitting. **Use of Weapons** by Iain [call me "M"] Banks was easily the best slick, smooth-running traditional SF novel of the year, and Colin Greenland certainly deserved the Clarke and BSFA Awards he won for **Take Back Plenty**, the best comic space opera in a long time. Finally, I was interested by Mary Gentle's **Scholars and Soldiers**. Some of the early stories in this collection are a bit patchy, but the later work is superb and original.

Martyn Taylor

The wheel turns. It was **The Handreared Boy** which made me an admirer of Brian Aldiss rather than a fan. **Forgotten Life** has restored a proper attitude. Everything Aldissian is here - wit, insight, Burma, sex - combined with that overwhelming compassion which characterises the truly great author. That it was not honoured is comment enough upon the British literary award scene.

Robert Holdstock's **Lavondyss** shares a quality with John Crowley's **Aegypt** and Umberto Eco's **Foucault's Pendulum**. It is not as good as its predecessor (**Mythago Wood**, **Little, Big** and **The Name of the Rose** respectively). Despite this lesser stature all are, in their complex, distinctive ways fascinating and compelling novels which enrich and surprise the reader. That their genre associations keep Messrs Holdstock and Crowley from as wide a readership as Eco is also a commentary, this time upon literary criticism.

What attracts me to the 'horror' story is that moment when consensual reality is revealed as being other than we believe. Few convey this moment as effectively as Jonathan Carroll. I discovered him in 1990,

and read everything. I choose **A Child Across the Sky** for that title moment.

Jon Wallace

I'd be hard pushed to say what kind of year this actually was. I've been reviewing and reading mostly dark fantasy, and my first book has to be Stephen King's **Four After Midnight**. I like Stephen King and this collection of four stories confirms that King knows how to face the reader to the end. After scary stuff like that, a perfect contrast turned out to be TV tie-ins. Anyone who watched and enjoyed **A Very Peculiar Practice** should read Andrew Davies' novels, the first based directly on the series, the second - **The New Frontier** - seeming to be based on an unnamed second series. Both capture Davies' scripts perfectly and, like the best TV tie-ins, add enough depth to make these more than just a reminder of the series. I've found it difficult these last couple of years to avoid mentioning Terry Pratchett, and this year is no exception. Of the three books of his that I've read this year, **Eric** has to stand out, and not just because of Josh Kirby's marvellous illustrations. Find out what happened to Rincewind, and a lot of other interesting things to boot. Read this.

Michael Coney doesn't get enough mention, but I've always liked his stuff. This year I

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liked **Fang the Goome**. Arthurian legend meets Events of Cosmic Significance.

Martin Waller

In no particular order: David Zindell's **Neverness**, one of the most startling examples of world-building for some years despite weaknesses elucidated on these pages by Maureen Speller. Two sequels: Paul Park's **Sugar Rain** and Robert Holdstock's **Lavondyss** ably kept up the impetus despite inevitably lacking the impact of the previous volumes. Brian Stableford's **The Empire of Fear** was a worthy addition to the alternative worlds genre. The first volume of David Wingrove's **Chung Kuo** looks worth persevering with, despite the best-seller/soap operatic elements. Greg Bear's **Queen of Angels** is his best since **Blood Music**. Honourable mentions for Pat Murphy's **The City**, **Not Long After** and Paul J McAuley's **Of the Fall**. Publishing hype of the year was Dan Simmons' **Hyperion** sequence - what a pity it all fell apart at the end, though if it awarded Nebulas for Best Use of Other People's Ideas he'd still be in with a chance. Finally, SF authors in search of a dozen spare plots could do worse than investigate John Julius Norwich's **Byzantium - The Early Centuries**.

Some Thoughts About the Arthur C Clarke Award 1991

By
Cecil Nurse

Reading a large volume of works in order to judge which is "the best" in some sense is an entirely different activity from reading for pleasure or for review. Unlike the former, one is obliged to read work that, left to oneself, one would not read at all or would read at a later date when one was in the mood, etc. Unlike the latter, one is obliged to formulate an opinion about each work based on the criteria that can be applied to highly dissimilar work, otherwise no *comparative* judgements can be made. I found very quickly that without a viewpoint from which every book was of interest regardless of my own personal enjoyment of it, the entire exercise threatened to become tedious, irritating, and meaningless. Paradoxically, having tentatively made my way to such a viewpoint, which I think can justly be called a *critical viewpoint*. It was the hierarchical arrangement of Winner, Short-list, and The Rest, that seemed ultimately meaningless. What is the point in determining which brand of apple is "the best" when the whole point is that they are different and are to be variously sampled as part of one's diet? I believe some variant of this paradox afflicts every awards juror, and in the end the definitive consideration becomes "which book do I feel should win this Award?" This is not necessarily a bad thing, since the continuing prestige of an Award is very much dependant on good choices being made.

Though reading 50 books in a year is not particularly unusual for me, it was unusual that these books all be published in one year, and be by 50 different authors.

They constituted a cross-section of the field that gave me a perspective on "the boundaries/nature of the genre" and "what writers are doing within the field" that I had not had before, given my own personally biased selection of reading matter. For the first time, I found that I had read a good percentage of the books reviewed in Vector, and found to my horror, that there was no predictable connection between what others said about a book and whether I enjoyed it or thought it was good. Reviews, I had to conclude, were a patchwork of differing subjectivities from which it is impossible to deduce any order of merit or interest. A second unexpected consequence of being an Arthur C Clarke Award juror has been that I no longer read reviews with much interest, the exception being "committed" reviewing, where the point of view of the reviewer is as important as the book under review.

So, what should I say about this year's short list? I cannot say that they were the best published this year, partly because the statement is meaningless, and partly because they were not my own favourites. The democratic process within the jury is of course designed to prevent idiosyncratic favourites from coming out ahead, and to take the best average given seven different tastes and critical priorities. My intention below is to step back a pace and determine what *sort* of books were in with the Arthur C Clarke award jurors this year.

Three biases are clear. Less than a quarter of the submissions to the award were by women, but women make up half the shortlist. I would venture to suggest that

this does reflect a greater level of inspiration and challenge in work from female writers. Secondly, there is a preponderance of relatively new writers. There is Misha's 1st novel, Pat Murphy's 3rd, Colin Greenland's 4th, Mary Gentle's 4th. Only Iain M Banks and K W Jeter have more than a handful of novels to their credit. This actually reflects submissions, in that relatively new writers were in the majority, but why established writers do not squeeze out newcomers as a matter of course, as they tend to in anthologies, is not all that easy to explain. Perhaps success makes writers lazy. The third bias is that the shortlist is heavily Anglo-centric: Greenland, Gentle, and Banks are UK writers, and Misha was published by Morrigan, a UK-based small publisher. While a case can be made for such a bias (US awards favour US writers, for example), I would like here to put the case against. In the first place, selection is only made from books that receive UK publication in the year, that is, from books that publishers hope or know will work in the UK market. In the second place, the jurors are Brits and will implicitly have whatever variant tastes distinguishes them from Americans. To then explicitly favour UK writers, given the good chance that the jurors are personally acquainted with those writers, is to put the award in danger of becoming a mutual admiration society, and disappearing up its, or down its own throat. I think it can be fairly said, without assuming privy knowledge, that this year's jury did not fully resist the temptation, for better or worse.

The Shortlist

The six books comprise two romances, two urban fables, and two space operas, by my reckoning. Hard SF in all its various guises (planets, aliens, near-future tech, cosmic visions) was out, as were morality tales (shall I name Womack, Brooke, Robert Charles Wilson, Alderman?) and explicit humour. The literary *jeu* or conceit, the fantasia, more or less ironic, more or less stylish, as in Earnestness and megalomania (shall I name Attanasio, Wingrove, Vollman?) were out.

So the romances. Mary Gentle's **Rats and Gargoyles** is rollicking revolution in magickland, in a world constructed painstakingly and with verve from the metaphysics of the Hermetic magic. God-demons live on Earth, served by rats, with humans at the bottom, and it is time for a change. It is a colourful hero's playground, with scarcely a sour ambiguity, futility, or tragedy to be seen. Surely only a sourpuss could ask for more.

K. W. Jeter's **Farewell Horizontal** has as its central conceit a huge cylinder. It has an inside, where ordinary life progresses on the Horizontal, an outside where tribes and freelancers inhabit the Vertical, an off-limits eveningside, an unknown downside hidden in the clouds, an a mysterious Centre inhabited by who-knows-what. Axxter is propelled on a quest that takes him to all of these places, to uncover/experience their reality. In both of these books the villainy is systematic rather than moral, and the hero wins by upsetting the status quo, but where Gentle's protagonists are able to start a new world and find love, Jeter's apotheosis is personal, riding off into the distance, fate fulfilled.

By contrast, in the urban fables the plot isn't exactly the thing. Misha's **Red Spider**, **White Web** features a thick prose-poem style ringing the variations on splintered glass, razor-steel and stained concrete, sometimes characterised as "compressed c-punk" but aspiring to a Burroughsian drone. The protagonist is an artist, living in the vicious slums outside the protected, hierarchical domes and their illusion-fed comforts. It is not hard to see this as a simple distortion of the condo/mall worlds surrounded by shockwaves of poverty and homelessness that

is the reality of many American cities. In the end Misha tries too hard and the style is too mannered to carry real emotion, but there are moments.

Pat Murphy's **The City, Not Long After** has an entirely different tone, cool, clear, economical, perfectly suited to the depopulated artist/magician-inhabited San Francisco of the title. Though the setting is post-apocalyptic and pastoral, it is not hard to see it as a portrait of an existing urban community/ideology with the rest of the silly noisy striving bewildered America subtracted. In both of these books there is a community of artists, but where Murphy's community is self-creating and her protagonist finds a place within it, Misha's is edge-dwelling and dependent, and her protagonist must find her own meanings. What makes these fables rather than romances, in my judgement, is that the central characters are witnesses to, rather than prime actors in the plot events, and their motives are moral rather than matters of survival.

"Greenland is a knowledgeable and gentle man who, in his own quiet hard-as-nails way, has decided to take on the heroic martial macho boors."

What distinguishes the two space operas is that they are not *real* space operas: they are new, redefined, modernised, self-conscious versions of the (literally) naive, fun, grand-canvas space adventures of old. Iain M Banks's *Use of Weapons* has the smoothly paced writing I tend to associate with mainstream fiction wrapped around an intergalactic tragedy. From the beginning, one strand goes forward as Diziet Zma searches out Agent Zakalwe (a weapon) and puts him to use, and one strand goes backward, exploring (perhaps) what it was about Zakalwe that made him such a good weapon. Subtle and complex, by which I mean that Banks knows how to "show, don't tell", disconcerting if you're used to being told. Probably one gets out of it what one puts into it: I discern a meditation on the

ambiguous moralities a utopian society might require in order to defend and propagate itself. Another person may see an Ace Double with chapters interleaved instead of back-to-back.

And so to the winner, Colin Greenland's **Take Back Plenty**. Dubbed "A Space Extravaganza" and "great, big, magnificent, galaxy-shaking", it isn't anything of the sort. Rather it is witty, clever, subversive, and essentially fastidious, written in choppy deadpan style. Tabitha Jute is an irritatingly irritatingly ordinary space barge driver who is dragged on a tour of a picture-postcard solar system, eventually to confront some hokey maggot-ridden aliens on Pluto. Instead of flights of that sublime sublimated rage that creates plots like "we discovered hyperspace, invented the megalaser, and fried their home planet", we get vaguely dissatisfied reminiscences about previous relationships. Not merely nostalgia for worlds we can no longer believe in, *intellectual* nostalgia which can't even believe in itself. Bah, I hated it! But wait, it won! What's going on here?

I think it is something like this: Greenland is a knowledgeable and gentle man who, in his own quiet hard-as-nails way, has decided to take on the heroic martial macho boors. He has done so by letting loose in their happy hunting grounds a Mrs Brown, under whose gaze the figments of adolescent dream and desire wither. "Beautiful androgynous twins" really means distinctly awkward moments when it comes to liaisons. The mutated space-capable child really is a bit nauseating to look at. The Han Solo type really is a bit of a slimeball. Being involved in major events means muddling along until you end up where you're going and can look back to see what it was all about. Mrs Brown has no business being in space future imaginary, she is unsympathetic magic, but here she is. A courageous and well-executed project it would be churlish not to applaud, and deserving of acclaim.

As for the Rest, the books that were considered but didn't make the shortlist, the books that didn't have a chance, the books that weren't submitted, the books that weren't published, the books that weren't written... well, that's life. This was the Arthur C Clarke Award shortlist.

Book Reviews

Edited by Chris Amies

Hermetech

Storm Constantine

Headline, 1991, 372pp, £14.95

"hermetechnology n. the science of organic energy potential esp. within fixed unit (within time, space)."

As might be inferred from the above definition, this book is primarily about sex. Its fourteen year old heroine, Ari Fember, spends most of the book preparing to lose her virginity. Another character, Nathan, seems to have no other purpose than to help Ari achieve her aim.

But I am getting ahead of myself. The setting is a future Earth, now called Gaiah, where the ozone layer has disappeared. The planet is devastated, dusty and dry, with poison gas clouds floating across its surface. Those who choose to live in the open have to cover their exposed skin with a protective gel, hence their name "jellycrusts". The rest of the population live in domed or underground cities, or else off-planet in the orbital city, Sky City One. There are artificial henges everywhere, created as sites for festivals and worship of the goddess Isis-Confidentia, an orbital artificial intelligence. Vehicles are powered by methane derived from human excreta. It's a bit Mad Max really.

In the country lives Ari Fember, teenage virgin, genetically altered by her father: in the city, Zambia Crevecoeur, male

prostitute, surgically altered by his/her employer - s/he now has six extra sexual organs in her stomach. The plot threads of Ari and Zambia become increasingly entwined as Ari travels to the city to meet her hermetech destiny.

As usual, Constantine has created an interesting, if sexually obsessed - story, with vivid atmosphere and some well-rounded characters. She has her faults, a tendency to info-dump which forced me to read some of her paragraphs twice, and some characters who are puppets or caricatures.

There are compensations: brilliant set pieces, such as the stay in Lazar City with the "jellycrusts". There are also some familiar preoccupations, such as the contrast between city corruption and country innocence, and the transcendence of humanity into something better, which the author also used in *The Monstrous Regiment*.

Some minor quibbles - I was irritated by Constantine's attempt to invent a pronoun for Zambia, namely "hir" or "She", as it jarred the sentences right off the page. It is also a little unbelievable that everything in the future can have changed so much, like the total absence of established religion, yet people still smoke tobacco!

The verdict - very readable. This author remains one to watch.

Barbara Davies

Clarke County, Space

Allen Steele

Legend, 1990, 302pp, £14.99

Clarke County is a space habitat, part agrarian settlement, part orbital factory, part pleasure dome and run for profit. Into this paradise comes Macy Westmoreland, preppy gangster's moll on the run from Family connections with the ultimate hitman on her trail. She carries insurance, although she does not know it is more than it seems. At the same time the Church of Elvis stages a convention in the football stadium and the feisty wife of the farmers' leader declares independence. And everything is mediated through Sheriff Bighorn, a Navajo giant who communes with gods.

In draft this must have seemed like a great idea, action, colour, mysticism, real human emotion all played out on the widescreen of orbital space. The problem is that the novel reads like a draft. It is an old saw to say that SF often falls down in characterisation but characters must act for reasons coherent with their personalities or else they become plot devices, no more.

Perhaps Bighorn and Jenny Schorr and the rest do act in character, but Steele does not show us enough to know. This is really a screenplay waiting for actors to breathe life into it (and it might not be a bad movie at that...)

I was reminded of Greg Bear reading this book, if only because Bear is unafraid to flesh out his narratives with precisely the human detail Steele eschews. The external threat - Icarus Five, a flying bomb - is also Bearish, although I doubt he would ever have brought it into play by such a sequence of coincidences (too many to be convincing) I also doubt he would have had popular culture ossify back in 1975 (An AI who wants to be Bob Dylan? C'mon...) which Steele appears to believe.

Steele also gives us a *deus ex machina* resolution... McCoy, Leonard, or Simon, ought to have been blue pencilled. His subplot adds nothing to the story - indeed, it distracts - and stretches suspension of disbelief too far.

As I said above, the outline of this must have read like a hell of a novel, the action does bowl along. Clarke County itself is believable. The characters seem interesting. There is, however, insufficient of everything to allow the story to come through. The success of *Orbital Decay* seems to have ensured *Clarke County, Space* went from author to printer without the intervention of an editor wanting their writer to produce their best work. *Clarke County, Space* may never have been a great novel but it could have been better than it is.

Martyn Taylor

Eric

Terry Pratchett

Gollancz, 1990, 126pp, £12.95, £7.99pb

Eric: an hilarious Discworld romp, gloriously illustrated in full colour by Josh Kirby, it says here.

Terry Pratchett won the BSFA Award for best novel of 1989 with *Pyramids*, but popularity has never been related to quality.

Eric is a departure in two ways; it is illustrated throughout by regular cover artist Josh Kirby; and it is boring. I was disappointed with *Pyramids* and failed to finish it, and now we get *Eric* which is worse. Thankfully it is also short. I'm sure Terry had a great time coming up with all the one-liners that typify his style, and I'm sure that anyone around him at the time will have found it all very funny, but on the page it doesn't work this time.

The story of 14 year-old incompetent demonologist Eric accidentally summoning up even more incompetent wizard Rincewind for the traditional three wishes and their subsequent misadventures lacks any of the depth of Terry's earlier Discworld novels. It seems to be a fix-up of weak vignettes that dull the reader so far that even the good jokes only raise a smile rather than the raucous laughter which accompanies something like *Mort*. Even Death, Pratchett's scene-stealing finest character, doesn't make the most of his cameos here. Rincewind, once funny, is now predictable, whilst the Luggage seems to be on Valium. The best line is a one-off about Sisyphus being forced to listen to interminable Health & Safety regulations before pushing his ball up the hill. The footnotes, that other regular source of laughs, are subdued, restrained or banal.

It might be interesting to see Terry Pratchett turn his hand to something deliberately less-humorous, if only to revitalise the comic strain which really is strained in *Eric*.

If you haven't read Pratchett, I recommend *Mort*, if you have, don't waste £8 on this one. The illustrations aren't that good either, despite Kirby actually having read the book, unlike most artists and blurb writers (and maybe even the odd editor?) seem to do.

Kev McVeigh

Griffin's Egg

Michael Swanwick

Legend, 1990, 110pp, £9.99

Michael Swanwick, for those who've been in a time capsule for the past decade, is one of the new generation of American writers who emerged in the early 80's. His two previous books, *In the Drift* and *Vacuum Flowers*, are somewhat dissimilar, so it should be no surprise that this novella represents a change of direction; what is unexpected is the direction he's taken.

Griffin's Egg is something of a curate's egg when compared to his earlier work. Set in the relatively near future, it attempts to be both the tale of a flawed love affair and a warning about the dangers of pollution (in this case, pollution of the pristine lunar wilderness).

Unfortunately the plot works against both themes, and the 90's orthodox futurology almost swamps the subtleties of the message with hi-tech noise.

The setting is interesting mainly because of its novelty; the aforementioned early 90's futurology has gone to seed and put down roots in SF. Swanwick has done his homework, mopping up K. Eric Drexler and Jaron Lanier and the ravings of Ted Nelson and Alan Kay and the result is that his future is a lot more 90's credible than the cyberpunk vistas of the 80's... and just as likely to be old hat in ten years time. We have brain implants, sure, but no cyberspace - instead, virtual reality has arrived with a bang and everyone's got a nanotech factory in their bedroom. You may have read this stuff before, but not as wallpaper in a work of SF; I got a real buzz of *deja vu* from it. (Incidentally, the leading edge of the computer visualisation field has collectively decided that **Neuromancer** is the form of the future and they're now doing their best to make it come true; if they latch onto this stuff the next century is going to wind up looking like a bad acid trip.)

The plot, unfortunately, damages the characterisation and turns the novella into a crucial turning point in history farrago involving briefcase nukes, the fourth world war, schizophrenia-inducing nanotech devices, stolen super-weapons and a cornucopia of other nasty plot widgets. It's so deterministic that the hero - Guther Weil, a lunar truck driver - is emotionally compromised by it; it's difficult to sustain belief in a character, however sympathetic, when the author feels it necessary to invoke a solar flare to initiate a sexual affair, then bashes the reader over the head with a stolen-gizmo plot line straight out of a 50's issue of *"Analog"*. A bit more delicacy and it would have worked - but as it is, the well-designed background and characterisation are bolted to a creaking, dreadful melodrama that, frankly, is not one of Swanwick's more memorable creations.

In conclusion, this is very much a mixed bag. The plot and credibility of the characters are both poor; but the portrayal of a future lunar colony is surprisingly gritty and the buzz-words are all there. If you want a glimpse of the SF wallpaper we'll be staring at for the next ten years, you might as well start here: otherwise, don't bother.

Charles Stross

Black Trillium

Morton Bradley, Julian May, Andre Norton

Grafton, 1990, 347pp, £13.99

As the information above indicates, this book was written by three authors. Each author has taken one of the three main personalities and followed her adventures and character development right through the whole of the narrative. Perhaps the weakest parts are those, as at the end, where all three personae come together. But at no time did I feel that this experimental treatment is contrived. I could not tell which of the three authors chose which character; nor at any time was it apparent that more than one mind was directing the novel; nor indeed any clue as to the sex of the author (or authors). It was one book - which is as it should be.

The novel tells how the evil King Voltrik of Labomok (assisted by his idealistic son Prince Antar, the power-mad wizard Orogastus, and a motley collection of villainous generals and sorcerers) invades the peaceful land of Ruwenda. Good King Krain and Queen Kalanthe are killed, but their three daughters escape, aided by a motley collection of Oddling servants.

The three princesses are triplets. Haramis, just the first-born, has been educated in queenly qualities; she is shrewd, reasoning and responsible. Kadiya is what used to be described as a 'tomboy', while Anigel is the archetypal feeble dumb blonde. They are soon separated and the novel relates their individual adventures as they try to rendezvous with each other and with the good Archi-Mage, Binah. This last lady once gave to each of the three princesses a magical bud of the extinct Black Trillium, a three-petalled flower. As a result, the numeral three, figures frequently in the imagery of the novel.

As they journey, the three princesses learn their own weaknesses and strengths, each taking on some of the balancing characteristic of her two sisters.

The mythical setting of the novel includes castles and mountains, but most of the action takes place in a jungle swamp with occasional ruined cities therein. Its denizens include a variety of Oddlings, some virtually human, some malevolently alien - especially the Skritek, humanoid alligators. In many places the plant-life is also carnivorous.

A sequel is in preparation.

Martin Brice

Adventureland

Steve Harris

Headline, 1990, 376pp, £12.95

Reborn

F. Paul Wilson

NEL, 1990, 344pp, £13.95

Headline is to be congratulated on publishing so many first novels, even though they vary very widely in quality. **Adventureland** is not only a first novel but Headline promises to publish Harris's second novel next year in accompanying publicity material which tells how he has tried various unskilled jobs and in his own words, "narrowly escaped being educated" at school.

Adventureland concerns the arrival in

Basingstoke (where Harris has spent most of his life) of a fairground whose Ghost Train (like the Tardis) is much bigger inside than outside and leads to a dreadful Limboland. Do not be misled by the title into thinking the novel is about happy adventures: it is horror in the tradition of Stephen King. Do not be put off by the Dedication at the front to "Razor Girl" and others, or the reference to "sci-fi tractor beams" on page 1. It is not science fiction. But what may put you off is that the book falls within the category of what might be called *grue* fiction. The horror consists largely of graphic descriptions of pain and injury (blood in urine, etc.) and is likely to appeal only to those with an unnatural share of *schadenfreude*.

The milieu is the seamy side of life in contemporary Basingstoke. Characters smoke roll-ups, wear jeans, drink Coke and 7 Up, shop at Owen Owen, operate one arm bandits, play computer games, utter casual obscenities and generally appear flippant. The hero is a callow youth with indulgent parents and a magic piece of antique jewellery which has eyes that light up (as often seen on TV). It is a sort of cross reacting to the presence of evil.

An inkling of the style may be gathered from this: "Fear gnawed away in the pit of his stomach like boiling lead".

F. Paul Wilson's **Reborn** involves more crosses, more evil (this time "much, much worse" than the Antichrist, according to the blurb) and there is a reference to "sci-fi" again on page 6, coincidentally. **Reborn** is a sequel to **The Keep** which, the publishers claim "became a phenomenal bestseller and a celebrated horror movie". In the latter, the evil was supposed to be destroyed. In this, the evil begins (conveniently) to come alive again.

F. Paul Wilson is a New Jersey physician and his knowledge of medicine is revealed in places. This is an easy read, full of short sentences, short paragraphs and so cliché-ridden and silly as to be quite loathsome. Like Harris, he has an eye for detail and heavy-handed humour. There are mechanical descriptions of what characters look like, what they wear, what they eat, what cars they drive, etc. but they are all soulless creatures to be manipulated.

An inkling of the banality of the style and dialogue may be gleaned from:

"Remember Jerry Shauer? Jim said as he twirled spaghetti on to his fork, 'Sure,' Bill said around a mouthful of scungilli Fra Diavolo. Dressed in a borrowed crew-neck sweater and a pair of wide-wale cords, he now looked like a graduate student. 'Our old quarterback.'"

Jim England

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The Land Beyond

Gill Alderman

Unwin, 1990, 305pp, £13.95

Last year Gill Alderman's debut novel **The Archivist** raised a few eyebrows, and garnered high praise for its rich characterisation and glorious travelogue.

The Land Beyond is also set on the planet Guna, but a long way in time and space from the events of its predecessor. The eponymous region of the North Pole is the location, suggesting immediately that Alderman has created a whole planet rather than just a City. The two books are linked, but only slightly and reading one is not essential to the other. I suspect that you will decide to do both anyway, however.

Three groups of people are involved in **The Land Beyond**: the Fishfolk, former Eskimos who now work within the predominantly underground habitat Traumesse built by the colonising Sineinians; the Sineinians who rescued the dying Fishfolk community; and the newest arrivals, the bizarre time-travelling Democratic Travelling Circus.

In particular we follow Ang Semo, the Artistic Director of "Greed", a highly successful computer-animated soap opera, who is melancholy over her childlessness, and disturbed by her relationships with the Fishfolk and the Circus. Salter Bren is a representative of the Fishfolk who meets Ang Semo formally and later socially; Float Gaby a young widow with an adventurous streak. The Circus is led by the eccentric clown Loy Sen.

This is a complex story of real relationships, love friendship, and all the confusions that go with them, told with intense attention to detail. It demands, and justifies, total concentration throughout as there is no obvious dramatic action. No straightforward plot as such. Things do progress to a climax, but this is far from the most important aspect of the novel. It brings to mind much of Samuel R. Delany's best writing and in particular **Dhalgren** in that respect.

When I listed **The Archivist** amongst my novels of the year in 1989 I wondered if there was room for improvement in Gill Alderman's writing. Is **The Land Beyond** significantly better than **The Archivist**? When the first novel slowed down there was always the delightful scenery to gaze at, clearly this is less potent at the North Pole and **The Land Beyond** is much slower, but I think it may eventually be regarded as one of the great works of SF in the 90s.

Sadly, it is also the last book to bear the Unwin Hyman name.

Kevin McVeigh

Polar City Blues

Katherine Kerr

Grafton, 1991, 282pp, £13.99

Katherine Kerr is a writer of fantasies - the kind that come in threes - and this is her first science fiction novel, a far-future murder mystery with elements of cyberpunk and the *noir* thriller. Or so it says here.

An alien is murdered in Polar City, Hagar; a backwoods world in the tiny and economically weak, human-dominated

Republic. Not only does this cause political problems for the Republic's uneasy relationships with the rival Confederation and Alliance, but the hapless psionic Mulligan is wiped clean of any psychic traces he picked up, while a chance discovery in one of Polar City's sleazier districts suggests that a new form of alien has arrived.

From start to finish, this is a generic romp. It's easy enough to accept a future which is California writ large (Kerr refers to most of Hagar's settlers coming from California, which presumably is - from where they brought basketball, drug culture, and Kelly's Bar and Grill) particularly as it may be "writ large" but it's still a very small and obscure part of a bigger Galaxy. There's a wry glance at the immediate future with Whites being the minority - and economically depressed if not oppressed - group. It's easy enough to accept it, but it just cries out for some stiffness in the plotting. There are some neat sub-plots, involving the romantic interest between Mulligan, a space-fleet veteran named Lacy, and a jealous AI, but the main plot fairly limps, with the big climax coming far too early and the strange nature of the murders may offer novelty to conventional detective readers, but come on folks; this is *science fiction*, after all! The novel fizzles out with everyone getting their heart's desires, then there's an appendix about baseball to conclude. There is one good joke about Mulligan "could have been a contender" (but psionics are banned from playing baseball), and a lame old joke about confusion between the two senses of the word "gay".

The story is told throughout in the present tense, presumably to add an air of tough immediacy, but the imagery is not so much street-cred as leafy-suburban-lane-cred: the cyberpunk-influenced details - sleazy background, drug references, hookers, punk kids called Little Joe, computers and Artificial Intelligences - are as cute as hell and the crime-thriller elements are as *noir* as Lord Peter Wimsey. Given Kerr's record, I imagine this book will sell well and to some extent deservedly so; it's solid middle-of-the-road SF nowhere near the cutting edge but far from the illiterate garbage-with-trademarks of the real slushpile. It's just less a *blues* than a sentimental ballad and slips down as effortlessly and forgettably as - well, a fantasy.

Andy Sawyer

Science Fiction Roots and Branches

Rhys Gannett & R.J. Ellis (Eds)

Macmillan, 1990, 210pp, £35.00 £9.99pb

Fiction is a means of communication. Popular fiction (always assuming that there is any fiction which does not aspire to that state) aims to communicate to a mass audience. In other words the author is intent on conveying something in a way which everyone can understand. Is that obvious? I would have thought so. But in that case why do people who write about popular fiction do so in a manner which is not understandable? Why, even in the introduction to this book of critical essays, do we come across the following:

"Science fiction's interrogative capacity is thus recurrently enabled in ways which, whilst not always coherent, amount (symbolically or allegorically) to defamiliarisations...?"

On the second or third reading I worked out that this meant something about science fiction raising questions which make us see the familiar in an unfamiliar light. A potentially interesting (if not particularly original thought, but one which is lost because of the unnecessarily inaccessible way it is phrased. If criticism has a purpose it is to open up, explore and illuminate the various levels of meaning found within any story. A good piece of criticism should make you read the story afresh and discover new things in it which add to your enjoyment. The purposes of criticism are not served if the criticism itself is opaque or even impenetrable.

And that, sad to say is the fate of much of the academic brouhaha dished up in this slim volume. Thomas D. and Alice S. Clareson produced an insightful essay on John Wyndham which will make me read his work with fresh eyes even if I don't always agree with their proposition that he is some sort of proto-feminist. Stanislaw Lem has a clear piece on **The War of the Worlds** which didn't exactly tell me anything fresh but which was welcome simply because there was one writer in the book at least who knows how to use the language. And the whole book is worthwhile simply for Patrick Parrinder's excellent overview article on "Scientists in Science Fiction".

Other than that, there is an essay entitled "Frank Herbert's Dune and the Discourse of Apocalyptic Ecologism in the United States" by R.J. Ellis whose title sets the tone for a work of such unrelieved turgidity that it makes me amazed even Herbert managed to get past the first two pages of his monumental tome. There is a piece on Lem by Jerzy Jarzabski which left me more confused than it found me. There are jottings about William Morris by Darko Suvin which don't actually appear to have a beginning, an end or a point. There is yet another essay on Ursula LeGuin's **The Dispossessed** - It is surely getting to the stage where it would take a lifetime to read everything written about this book, without actually leaving any time left over to read the novel itself - this time trying to compare it to T.S. Eliot's **Four Quartets**, which I can't believe is going to add much to our appreciation of either work. And more and more and more.

Done well, criticism is important, useful and even entertaining. So why do so many people who spend so much time studying our best writers display such a complete inability to write a clear and coherent sentence themselves?

Paul Kincaid

Best New SF 4

ed. Gardner Dozois
Robinson, 1990, 598pp, £6.99

Best New Horror

ed. Stephen Jones and Ramsey Campbell
Robinson, 1990, 390pp, £6.99

As longtime readers of **Vector** will probably recall, I'm a great admirer of Gardner Dozois' annual collection of best new short science fiction. It's as much a vital reference tool as it is an entertainment, what with an exhaustingly thorough and perceptive summation of the year's activities and a huge list of "Honorable Mentions" as well as a carefully chosen and hopefully representative selection of short stories. Dozois reads widely, which makes the preponderance of stories from **Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine** (which Dozois edits) and **The Magazine of Science Fiction** and **Fantasy** perhaps a little disappointing, but he did include one story from **Interzone**, and one from the promising new small press magazine, **Strange Plasma**, and there is a strong sense that he does try to resist bias, presenting as fair a sampling as possible.

On this showing, 1989 was a rich year indeed. In fact, it's difficult to single out particular stories for comment, though I was especially pleased with the inclusion of Judith Moffett's "Tiny Tango", and John Crowley's dense and intelligently-argued time-travel story, as well as contributions from the likes of Robert Silverberg, Michael Swanwick, Mike Resnick, Charles Sheffield and Greg Benford and newer names, such as our own William King and Janet Kagan. If I was asked to suggest a suitable collection to introduce someone to the multiplicity of themes and styles which make up science fiction, and give them a taste for further exploration, then unhesitatingly I would choose this.

Whether, seeking an introduction to the horror genre, I would offer **Best New Horror**. I'm not so sure, not least because, at the end of the anthology I emerged even less certain as to what horror is than I was before I started reading. This may underline a problem inherent in the genre, that people, the editors apparently included, have trouble offering any sort of description without resorting to negative definitions, in which case this collection has been entirely successful in demonstrating the range of material. Yet, more than once, they founder on the rock of describing stories as being horror, although they were originally published elsewhere. Too much of this and one begins to wonder if the genre exists at all or whether one is trying to isolate a particular element in a series of otherwise unrelated stories. Certainly, this collection ranges from the obviously supernatural work of Robert Westall and Cherry Wilder, through some subtle and psychological stories from the likes of Alex Quirio and Nicholas Royle, to the overtly visceral work of Robert McCammon and Kim Newman. If I have a major objection to the collection, it is the sense of insubstantiality which pervades the anthology. It seems to be a pale shadow of the Dozois volume, using the same format

but at a much more superficial level, and I was surprised to discover that there were only five fewer stories than in the Dozois volume. Of the two, I admit to being more inclined towards Dozois' collection, but if Robinson continue to produce an annual horror collection, with a little more effort, it could easily become as essential in its field. As the editors themselves recognise, there is a need for horror literature to be given a more considered hearing, and a solid annual survey would do just that.

Maureen Speller

The Shadow of Heaven

Bob Shaw
Gollancz, 1991, 174pp, £13.99

First published in paperback in 1969, this reappeared abridged in 1970, though my 1978 Corgi is the original novel. Gollancz have given us the first hardcover version, "revised for this edition", and the changes are intriguing.

No space for a complete survey, but just the opening pages give the flavour, with changes in both technology and characterisation. "Checked the files" and "card system" become "run any kind of meat scan" and "database", for example. Measurements are metricated - a pointless exercise for me as I have to multiply the figures back to have any mental picture of the scene, and here I found an intriguing confusion: a room 140ft x 40ft becomes 35m x 15m - but the German translation (Die **gruenen Inseln**, Goldmann, 1974) gives us 30m x 12m, so the office has miraculously stretched too.

Each worker has 5ft x 4ft originally: in the German edition this becomes 1.50m x 1.20m but the new hardcover describes this much more realistically as "enough room for a knee-hole desk and a swing-out stool".

Our Hero notices a copy-girl's perfume, discovers it's called "Roast Beef", and, realising the cost of such a rare scent, asks "Do you work nights?" at which "Jean compressed her lips and walked away haughtily". In the new version, he jokingly warns her "Don't come any closer or I might try to eat you all up"; whereupon, asking "Is that a promise?", Jean "winked at him and stalked away".

Obviously Bob has put a great deal of thought into his earlier version's shortcomings, yet ultimately it is minor aspects that are changed. The plot - a grossly overcrowded Earth, with a satellite station known as Heaven where the real power is wielded - continues to exert a fascination reminiscent of the "sensawunda" tales of 1950s SF.

Another way of putting this is to say that you will find you have a real story, with a beginning, a middle and an end; you have fairly believable characters behaving as reasonably as the plot will allow; you have no gibberish computerspeak, no cyberpunk splatter. But then, this is Bob Shaw: as soon expect Asimov to write a fantasy quest as to fear the touch of post-modernism in these pages.

The Shadow of Heaven is good competent pulp SF, helped not one iota by the totally unimaginative standardised dust wrapper; Bob has written a lot better, and will give us more in years to come, but

as an only slightly updated traditional tale this will more than adequately brighten up a quiet weekend for you.

Ken Lake

Peace Maker

Robert and Frank Holt
Headline, 1990, 499pp, £4.99

Anyone seeking an identikit for a novel I will dislike could do little better than find something glorifying the SDI written by two American military types. I picked up **Peace Maker** ready to dislike it thoroughly. I put it down disliking it, but for different reasons.

The story concerns the deployment of an orbital anti-missile laser system and reaction to it. The Soviets, naturally, decide to test the system to destruction with their particle beam weaponry and the FBI decide to kill the president (well, they've done it before...) One platform is destroyed and then the system runs amok destroying half North Korea. When they decide to turn it off its mad professor creator goes to his secret terminal and turns it back on

At this point the story gets out of control with a Rambo head of the CIA (George Bush? Bill Casey?) taking on the FBI hit squad, heroic helicopter pilots giving their last full measure, Soviet sleepers setting off to poison America and much else besides. What cohesion the plot had disappears in a welter of shoot 'em up hokum (and the descriptions of the killings and the Korean firestorm betray an ambivalence such as outlined in Trevor Griffiths' **The Comedians**). That the Hols despise politicians is plain, but what plot purpose was served by making the Soviet president the sort of paranoid cunning peasant who would have made Krushchev blush? Moscow ain't like that, boys.

This is a page turner, of that there is no doubt, but that doesn't make it a good book. I cannot suspend disbelief long enough to credit Hauge, the mad scientist genius, being allowed his own private access to the control system (for me Jack McDevitt's **The Hercules Text** was spoiled by a similar impossibility). I was left uncertain of the Hols' attitude towards the technology (the original Peacemaker needed a human to aim and fire it). Their slasher's loving depiction of slaughter left me feeling slightly soiled.

I will end with this quotation from page 99: "... MAD had been the basis for peace among the super-powers for fifty-three years - the longest period without war between these nations in modern history." The super-powers have only ever been at war (undeclared) once, in 1919 when the USA joined the anti-Bolshevik invasion, and if the Secretary of State believes otherwise we are in real trouble.

Martyn Taylor

The Bone Forest

Robert Holdstock
Grafton, 1991, 229pp, £13.99

One thing this collection shows is that it wasn't with the "mythago" stories that Robert Holdstock finally found his true voice. Here there are stories dating from 1976 which share the charged atmosphere of nascent myth that gives his "mythago" work such power. In fact his whole career has been built around the related threads of time and mythology, and the closer he gets to the origins of both, the stronger his writing becomes.

The "mythago" stories, here represented by "The Bone Forest", are the perfect expression of this. Any journey into Rhyeph Wood involves travelling back to ever more primitive versions of common myth figures. It is a simple situation which Holdstock seems able to return to constantly with ever fresh ideas. In this story George Huxley, father of Steven who was the central figure in *Mythago Wood*, encounters his own "mythago", a green man who seems able to enliven the marriage bed in a way in which Huxley's own obsessions have long since denied to him. It is a beautifully judged collision of the personal and the mythic which shows Holdstock at his best.

The same careful working-out of the mystic and mythical forces which have powered so much of Holdstock's recent work are in evidence in the other stories in this collection. With only a couple of exceptions every one of the pieces displays a considerable talent mining a seam of inspiration which has produced some extraordinarily good work. Read separately it is hard to find a dud note in any of these stories, but reading them all together as they are gathered here one cannot help noticing a tendency to sound a similar note. There is a sameness about the way that he explores the primitive, as if only the dark forest, or a modern setting still under the shadow of the distant past, will now suit his storytelling. This is not to deny the considerable power of individual stories, most notably "The Boy who Jumped the Rapids" and "Thorn", but there are failures also. Time of the Tree seems to contain every icon Holdstock has ever put into his fiction, a man watching as geological ages are played out upon his own body until primitive cultures arise and one sacrificed female enters into a mystic union with him: but it remains resolutely a collection of symbols with no unifying story. On the other hand "Scarrowfell", a young girl's observations on a village festival as the climax of which she will be married to an ancient spirit, has a good story woven around such formulaic horror elements that the story never quite manages to pack the punch it promises. And it is only in the final story, "The Time Beyond Age", regarding clinical observations of super-rapid aging, that the collection acquires the change of pace it so desperately needs.

Individually, these stories represent a writer at the height of his powers. Brought together you begin to wish that Holdstock could leaven his obsessions with a little variety once in a while.

Paul Kinead

Shadowbreed

David Ferling
GW Books, 1990, 239pp, £4.99

Krokodil Tears

Jack Yeovil
GW Books, 1990, 259pp, £4.99

Shadowbreed need not detain us long, being the sort of thing Michael Moorcock used to knock out in a couple of weeks when he was running *New Worlds*, only not quite so well-written. Like *Krokodil Tears* it is the second volume of a trilogy.

"Again and again, the weapon swung, and each sweep left another hideous victim writhing in agony, its brains oozing from its pulverised green skull..." You get the picture. It is apparently set in some period of prehistory, but most of the names are Teutonic. You get dwarves, orcs, goblins, half-men, rat priests; there is gunpowder and the weapons and armour, from the accompanying illustrations, are late medieval, but — I'm not sure if I can go on.

Krokodil Tears comes from the cyberpunk end of the teen market, or rather cybergoth, according to the blurb, a new one on me but presumably accounting for the eruptions of screaming Lovecraft on a backcloth that is straight William Gibson/*Damnation Alley* hybrid. Yeovil, I assume, is our own dear Kim Newman, which is why it is some way from plain awful. God knows, it would win few awards for originality or subtlety, but there is at least a zap, verve and sense of humour about a tale of a cyborg heroine battling across a disintegrating America against Elder Nguyen Seth, High Priest of the Dark Ones plotting to bring about the Apocalypse. Yeovil gives us a world where Britain lost the Malvinas War, populated by such as President North, Prime Minister Archer, jolly patriotic singer John Lydon whose biggest hit was a rendition of "God Save the Queen", and the romantic novices of Margaret Thatcher.

These are, I suppose, no more than teenage power fantasies, although Yeovil/Newman, not for the first time, makes some effort to subvert and transcend the genre. The violence is inevitable, and Yeovil even gives us a tongue-in-cheek running body count in one of the more robust scenes. They certainly aroused in me no temptation to go out and bash an old lady over the head with an axe. Amateur sociologists may debate at leisure their effect on the target market.

An odd thought: despite the multiple slayings and occasional spot of hanky-panky, the word "fuck" throughout *Krokodil Tears* is replaced with the more decorous "freak".

Martin Waller

Lullaby

Diane Guest
Fontana, 1990, 299pp, £3.50

Hallowes' Hell

Neville Stead
Headline, 1990, 310pp, £3.99

What do you say when your ten year old daughter says her sister is possessed? Judd Pauling has not only this to contend with, but also his suspiciously secretive

wife, Rachel, and her weird mother. Does the family have some dreadful secret? Judd wants to know, to help. But no-one will help him.

Judd's patience with his children and the strength of his marriage are put to the test when he agrees to visit his mother-in-law's house on a deserted stretch of the Maine coast. But something in the house is upsetting his two daughters. There is a malevolent spirit in the house, and it's using his youngest daughter as a host.

There have been a great number of novels and films, concerning possessed children, and in Diane Guest's *Lullaby* the subject no longer has an original feel. While the author does well with the suspense, there is a marked lack of drama toward the end and a feeling that something important has been edited out.

Neville Stead, on the other hand, has done well crossing over from crime fiction to horror. In *Hallowes' Hell*, we are given a frightening and tense view of a village whose past is about to be exhumed for the world to see; a past that concerns the death of 700 troops killed by a German warship that turned up off the Devon coast and opened fire on allied servicemen preparing for the D-Day landings. The soldiers were secretly buried. A new telephone exchange has just been opened in Hallowes. Suddenly people are receiving calls they weren't meant to hear, concerning their loved ones. The wife hearing her adulterous husband arranging a rendezvous with his mistress; the parents listening to a pornographic film maker selling videos of himself with their 16 year old daughter. The pornographer is discovered beaten and bleeding beside his blood-splashed Mickey Mouse phone. "That bloody Mickey Mouse did it", is all he tells the police from his hospital bed.

TV's and radio's too, begin giving out messages. It seems the modern electronic gadgetry has developed a conscience.

The social life of the village is crumbling. The cause of this phenomenon lies in the blood-red soil of Widow's Field, used forty years earlier as a mass grave. Revenge from beyond the grave.

Well written and entertaining.

Martin Webb

Verne's Journey to the Centre of Self

William Butcher
Macmillan, 1990, £35

This review is dedicated to the proposition that scholarly works can be reviewed by non-scholars, and, more controversially, to the proposition that a scholarly work with nothing to offer the non-scholar is in effect a fanzine for eggheads. How does this volume, from a lecturer in French literature about "the only Frenchman to have achieved truly universal renown", rate? The many untranslated excerpts are awkward, and one generally has to take Butcher's word for what they demonstrate. Likewise the extended discussion of Verne's use of tenses (remember *passé simple*, *passé composé* etc?) It is also difficult to cope with the rigorous manner in which abstract and surely perverse points are made, constituting as they do a continuing guerrilla war with (unseen) scholarly antagonists. It

is a lot like reading Vol. 3 in a five-volume saga, and one can but wish that scholars (Butcher included) would take greater pains to make their respective volumes stand alone; that is, to conduct their debate with at least some reference to common sense. Having said that, there is meat here to reward the determined reader.

Butcher's avowed intention is to fill the gap in scholarship between the major re-evaluation that Verne's works have recently undergone in France and their lack of serious consideration in Britain. More specifically, he wishes to prove that Verne has been "misconceived" as a writer for children and/or of science fiction, and should be thought of as a literary writer; by which I believe he means that he has a rightful place in the history (and ongoing process) of literature. Unlike SF? Despite this blatant appeal to prejudice, this work does go some way to proving that even such a writer as Verne can repay scholarly study. By placing Verne at the end of a 19th century struggling with a narrowing of earthly horizons, with the intensely linear and (at that time) self-evident logic of "progress", with the theories of Darwin and their implicit contradiction of "the white man is the pinnacle of Nature", with the severe demands for realism from Science, and with challenges to the definition of fiction and The Novel, and by finding that he has engaged with these concerns with an "all-encompassing irony", Butcher not only puts his finger on some of the reasons why Verne has been so popular and inspiring over the years, but contributes a viewpoint from which SF itself could be said to have "literary significance". That is, that a text need not be didactic, discursive, or otherwise self-conscious in order to constitute a contribution to, or commentary upon, literature. What seems simple, straightforward, or superficial, becomes as fascinating and complex as a fossil for later generations, when the contingent nature of the work ceases to be held against it and it becomes instead a representative of its time and a reflector of our own.

This may be Butcher's point at all; it is hard to tell with such a small and defensive chapter in the ongoing Saga of Scholarship. Nevertheless, worth requesting at one's local library, if only to get a sense of the themes within the first glimmers of the genre.

Cecil Nune

The Scientific Lady: A Social History of Women's Scientific Interests, 1520 - 1918

Patricia Phillips

Wiedenfeld & Nicolson, 1990, 279pp, £25.00

To start with, there's a missing phrase in the title: "in England". All right, so there are some glimpses at what was happening in Scotland and Ireland, but nothing about the rest of the world at all: in my view that makes the title a con. Anyway, the thesis of the book is interesting enough. In England after the Renaissance, and down to the end of the nineteenth century, men's education was totally dominated by the Greek and Roman classics; no gentleman could do without such grounding. Women, as inferior beings, obviously could not cope with such

intellectually demanding pursuits, and so it was regarded as perfectly proper for them to get involved in science; nor did women have to prove their social status by ignoring the debasingly practical things that scientific work implied. The situation changed c. 1900, for twin, opposing, reasons: science became important, and thus socially respectable for gentlemen, and women realised that they had to beat men on their own ground (i.e. with classics and similar subjects).

The book does not really offer a rigorous proof of the thesis, and is particularly weak on the later nineteenth-century transition. As a professional historian, I am rather put off by the book's lack of methodology or structure, and its preference for anecdote over analysis. As a lay reader in this area, however, I found it enjoyable to read: the lack of rigour and analysis doesn't matter so much if the anecdotes are good, in other words. Anyone interested in the history of science or in women's history is likely to get something out of it, if only entertainment, and there are some marvellous women to meet in these pages. Nor did I know that Samuel Pepys used to give his wife lectures on geography after coming back from a tiring couple of hours at the office (or in bed with a serving girl), nor that once she got so exasperated with him she tried to brand him with red-hot tongs. Good for her! However, I warn Brian Aldiss off this book, if he wants to avoid a stroke: Patricia Phillips achieves what an SF reader would imagine to be the impossible — she discusses English women's involvement in science in the early nineteenth century without once mentioning Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*, or the invention of SF.

Edward James

Wulfsyarn

Phillip Mann

Gollancz, 1990, 287pp, £13.95

At its crudest, the task of the biographer is to assemble and present verified facts. Interpretation of those facts is more delicately judged, but it is still the perceived duty of the biographer to remain aloof from his subject. It is, however, also an accepted fact that many biographers do become in some way "attached" to their chosen subjects, developing a proprietorial or defensive attitude towards the person. With a machine intelligence, one might reasonably suppose that the problem of emotional identification wouldn't arise, but that in turn supposes that machine intelligences do not possess what we would characterise as "human" attributes. In actual scientific terms we are in no position to be certain as to what emotional potential artificial intelligences might possibly possess, but in science fiction almost anything is feasible. In *Wulfsyarn*, Phillip Mann explores what it might mean for an artificial intelligence, Wulf the autoscrite, to compile the facts of the life of Jon Wilberfoss, and then present an interpretation of them.

Jon Wilberfoss is a very troubled man, haunted by his rejection of a violent past, and by the mystery of his loss of *The Nightingale*, a massive hospital ship apparently lost with all hands, only to reappear a year later with Wilberfoss as the

sole survivor. The intention seems to be that Wulf's non-humanity will in some way facilitate Wilberfoss's confidences in a way that a human might not, providing an interesting commentary on the man-machine relationship. Mann proposes that it is entirely possible for a man and an intelligent robot to form a relationship beyond that of interrogator and respondent, as it becomes clear that Wulf's response to his subject is not that of simple analysis.

That this relationship does develop must fire the reader to consider Wulf himself. Quite apart from the story he has been commissioned to tell, Wulf has his own story, which he interpolates at various points through the novel, and also the story of Lily, a robot as old as himself, and as remarkable. This not unnaturally leads one to ask whether a robot, a machine intelligence, can possess a past, let alone be able to present and comment upon it. With this premise Mann raises such attractive philosophical problems, one might almost overlook the story Wulf tells, although the reader would be unwise to do so, for Wulf's own "life" is bound up with Wilberfoss's, which is in turn another violation of that perfect impartiality Wulf and any biographer seeks.

To be honest, one quickly forgets, as quickly as many of the characters in this novel, that Wulf is not human although the written word more easily conceals his appearance. He has a strong, well-developed character, and a charming diffidence is displayed as he constantly reviews his efforts as biographer, and analyses the range of possible approaches as self-consciously as any human author.

But that, of course, is how I choose to interpret my reading of Wulf's "character", in the same way that my understanding of Wilberfoss is obtained and filtered through Wulf's non-human agency. When one considers the number of intermediate stages through which Wilberfoss's remarkable encounter with another alien consciousness is passed before I, as reader, see it, the extent of the opportunities for understanding and misinterpretation is almost limitless.

In essence, Mann is talking about methods of communication and understanding between different, often radically so, lifeworlds. The suggestion is that the ability to appreciate and interpret human emotions and actions may not be confined to the human race itself, and conversely that one cannot necessarily rely on one's fellows to interpret as one might wish.

This is a fine novel, intricately constructed, and filled with wonderful possibilities. It disappoints me that an author like Mann, in a loudly-proclaimed literature of ideas, seems to languish in comparative obscurity in this country, when he has so much to contribute to our genre, and I very much hope this novel will go a long way towards rectifying that omission.

Maureen Speller

Stone

Joe Donnelly

Barrie & Jenkins, 1990, 381pp, £12.99

Sweet Heart

Peter James

Gollancz, 1990, 278pp, £13.95

"The past is a foreign country" LP Hartley wrote at the beginning of **The Go-Between**; the past also plays havoc with the present and can very well negate the future.... Both these novels attest to the threat that the past can pose.

Peter James has written about Charley and her husband Tom moving into Elmwood Mill, deep in the heart of Sussex, a dream come true for both of them; here, they feel, they will be able to start a family.... While Joe Donnelly relates the purchase of Cromwath House, deep in the heart of rural Scotland, where Alan Crombie and his son Tom encounter strange terrifying dreams and Helen becomes inordinately house-proud and their twin daughters betray fey knowledge....

Neither book sticks to one viewpoint, though in the main these are the stories of Charley and Alan. Each gradually begins to sense something amiss, out of kilter, awry, to the point where they both question their own sanity. Both encounter disturbing hallucinations, nightmares and waking dreams uncomfortably blending reality and presumed fantasy.... Chickens are definitely a threatened species: in both books they're slaughtered indiscriminately by someone or something unknown!

Charley's attempt to rationalise the strange feelings and happenings, the flash-forwards or -backwards convince her to undergo regressive hypnosis. The former lives seem so real, and relics from the former life begin to appear in her present, to the point where she is threatened with her life. "Something stirred deep in her memory. Like a forgotten name on the tip of the tongue it hung there, tantalising her, then slipped away.... she felt for some reason she did not understand, afraid." (p21) James has researched such esoteric subjects as rebirth into his mother's womb, regressive hypnosis: among his previous lives he has been a Spitfire pilot in World War II, a fishmonger in Hull, a Frenchwoman who was murdered by her lover and a primitive native on a South Seas island.... The narrative hook, the characters themselves, ensure that much of this phenomenon is credible - and uncomfortable. Alan's attempt to rationalise the strange happenings is centred around the small community who have befriended him; they have less graphic but no less sinister stories to tell of strange goings on where stood old Celtic standing stones, black and mystical, erected some 6,000 years ago. His wife Helen has suffered a nervous breakdown and their move to this hundred-year-old house should help her recover; instead, she becomes possessed by the very stone of the building, and dark evil creatures are being summoned, to savage anything that walks at night. Some deaths are not for the squeamish. The feeling on entering the house is one of deep depression, an oppressive, dark sensation - contrasting with the bright daylight outside. There may be echoes of Amityville and all the others, but this seems far more credible. "When he

looked at his mother these days, he thought of empty corridors that took you for ever to walk, and deep dark pits, and wild wet moorland littered with the bodies of slain men and overshadowed by great birds that had worm-eaten holes where their eyes should be." (p292). An uncomfortable read. Two similar themes, of the past overshadowing and threatening the present; both handled differently but well.

Nik Morton

The Covenant of the Flame

David Morrell

Headline, 1991, 402pp, £14.95

As the world heads for ecological disaster an anonymous group of eco-vigilantes have taken it into their heads to extract appropriate and violent retribution from the planet's polluters. Tens Drake, a vegetarian environmental journalist - whose own father was once one of the worst perpetrators of crimes against the planet - is concerned with the sudden disappearance of a man, Joseph Martin, with whom she had a budding but platonic relationship. Helped by Lieutenant Craig of the Missing Persons Bureau, she uncovers Martin's secret past and discovers a seven-hundred year old conspiracy, with its roots deep in religious heresy, involving the highest political and legal positions in the country.

Despite their differences in attitude and taste, an unlikely romance blossoms between Craig and Tess as their enquiries lead them into the dark and corrupt side of mankind.

The story is well-paced and a lively read. One also suspects a film may come from it.

Martin Webb

Warrior

Donald E McQuinn

Legend, 1990, 634pp, £14.99

Several centuries into a post-apocalypse America Gan flees his tribe, the Dog People, after treachery makes life there hazardous. Accompanied by his friend, Clas, Necla (his love) and Sylva a priestess from Ola sent on a mission to find "the Door", he rescues several recently revived pre-Apocalypse survivors from an attack by another tribe, the Mountain People. The other revivalists are captured by Alena, the despotic ruler of Ola. The revivalists help Gan fulfil his mother's prophecy by teaming up with him and another race, the Harbundai, against Alena. Gan's war against the despot brings with it many social reforms, but at the end of volume one of the trilogy his success is threatened by the revivalist maniac, Jones and the renegade Alena who are plotting a religious rebellion. In addition, Clas has left Gan's side to unite the Dog People once more and Sylva has resumed her search for "the Door". In the author's favour is his enthusiasm for the subject and the skill with which he unfolds the story. Details such as hunting practice, battle plans and the "innovations" the revivalists bring lend the world of the story a depth and interest lacking from so many similar books. The women have key

roles, the macho stereotyping is constantly questioned and the meaning of "progress" is continually examined. The length, on the other hand, is as much a liability as an asset and might deter as many people as it attracts. If the other two volumes are as long the complete story in hardback will come to 1900 pages and cost nearly £45.00. **Warrior** could easily have lost a third of its length, and would have gained from a tightness of plot what it shed in unnecessary detail.

McQuinn's style is readable, but it is also unremarkable, the plot broadly, and in detail, too clichéd for involvement. Plot demands also force inadequately explained changes in several characters, chief among these being Gan's fear of Necla's possible betrayal and the betrayal of their countrymen by two of the revivalists, Carter and Jones. These complications are so artificial I wondered if McQuinn was attempting to hide **Warrior's** lack of original ideas with constant plot distractions.

In the end, McQuinn is no stylist and without that his skill and enthusiasm are not enough to distinguish him from all the others who hack it for a living.

Terry Broome

The Eye of the World

Robert Jordan

Orbit, 1990, 670pp, £13.95

There ah wuz, in the middle of a heatwave confronting a hefty tome the size of a small encyclopaedia, Book One of *The Wheel of Time*. I hadn't read trilogy fantasy for years, but I was in the mood for a long trek through a magic land. It had maps, a glossary of names I could almost swear I had seen before - Morgaine, The One Power, Tar Valon, Caemlyn, the Great Blight - and on the cover a painting of an armed travelling party leaving a sleepy village. This was the real stuff, and now I was going to find out if this sort of thing was any good.

What I found was an honest gamer's transmutation of (and tribute to) **Lord of the Rings**, copying many of the classic scenes and creatures (Black Riders become myrddraal, ents become Ogier, orcs become trolls, hobbits become farm-boys from The Two Rivers), but replacing Tolkien's fairy-fantasy and portentousness with some pragmatic tool-using-type magic and an easy facility with sketches of a busy middle-kid world. Political complexities, rumours, inns and villages, minority cultures, Capital Letter Legends told without ye aulde grammar: it was FRP-land, totally unabashed by any similarity to what had been done before - indeed reveling in it - and nevertheless as uniquely itself and respectfully treated as any GM's extrapolated world. The central (read: player-) characters were bland to the point of invisibility, tightly enmeshed in The Pattern and destined for importance: willy-nilly, their internality little more than an occasional refusal to understand or think, a bit of homesickness, and flashes of muted machismo. Every now and again the disguise slipped, and I could see they were really wearing teashirts and trainers, but the story and the world and the incidents unrolled apace. Heck, I enjoyed it! I'd been there before, right through to the

summing up of "things we are going to do next time" in the let-down after the geas had been fulfilled and the treasure counted.

Though the formula is familiar to me, the genre is not, so I can't say whether this work stands out in any way from the rest. Two things recommend it. One is its unpretentiousness: no liberties have been taken or subversions attempted yet the formula does not seem to have been slavishly or cynically followed. The writing remains lively, despite the lack of what one might call literary originality or metaphysical perversity (and perhaps because of it). Only a sincere acolyte can do that. The other is its length. When *The Wheel of Time* is completed, which may or may not be at the end of the third volume, and assuming that Jordan doesn't panic when he runs out of cribs from *Loth*, it will be a dream at least a week long. Fantasy, yes, but **heroic** fantasy, from which it is possible to emerge with that precious intimation that we (human beings) really are larger than the lives to which we are bound. *Eye* worked for me, ex-gamer that I may be.

Cecil Nurse

Deathwing

Neil Jones & David Pringle
GW, 1990, 257pp, £4.99

Inquisitor

Ian Watson
GW, 1990, 246pp, £4.99

Well, here's a pretty kettle of Martian sandfish. What are the likes of Ian Watson, Storm Constantine and others doing putting together this farrago of Space Marines, galactic empires and ravening demons from the Void?

Earning an honest penny, I assume; after all, Watson himself, the biggest name on offer, has shown several examples already of his willingness to go well down-market for ideological reasons. *Inquisitor*, a full-length novel, and the accompanying collection of short stories, are set in the world of Warhammer 40,000 (presumably Anno Domini). My researches are less than exhaustive, but this has something to do with the world of war-gaming, so here, I suppose, we have the book of the tin soldier, with possibly a comic strip thrown in somewhere down the line. It's all wildly derivative - Red Indians in space, the Spanish Inquisition in space, Viet Nam in space - but the calibre of the writers involved lifts the whole exercise a couple of notches off rock bottom. An evil emperor, the afore-mentioned Marines, copious illustrations and the sinister Gene Stealers - I quite liked the Gene Stealers, who mimic and grotesquely mutate other races who fall under their sway.

In Brian Aldiss's memorable phrase, the whole gigantic roadshow works by magic. There is little internal consistency, perhaps inevitably given the number of writers involved, but it all has a certain crude vigour, and Watson throws in some typically Watsonian musings about evolution. One wonders what the *Times Literary Supplement*, dragged in for the sleeve notes, would make of it all.

God knows, I've read far worse, and occasionally from the so-called titans of

the genre. A set question for 'O' level students: given that this sort of thing might serve to attract new readers to SF, should name writers devote their time and energies to it, or leave it to the hacks whose efforts would inevitably be far worse? Discuss.

Martin Waller

Tigana

Guy Gavriel Kay
Penguin, 1990, 688pp, £7.99

Tolkien, along with Joyce, I daily curse for the sins of their disciples. Yet here is the pontiff of Tolkienites producing a doorstep fantasy which had me turning the pages long into the night, and in the bookshop the next day searching out his earlier work. What differentiates *Tigana* from other "by the mile" cod medieval fantasies? The ingredients are, after all, bog standard - a quest by a dispossessed prince and adoring entourage, foul sorcery, love, bravery and a final battle which leaves everyone happily alive or dead as the case may be. The difference is in the characters.

Kay presents us with a battery of varied protagonists, all of whom act as they do because that is the way their characters demand. Even what appears to be a *deus ex machina* plot device at the very end is, on consideration, entirely in character. The darkest villains - and these are as black as black can be, by their deeds - turn out to be a cautious if ambitious bureaucrat of sorcery and a tyrant with a heart of gilt driven to distraction by the death in battle of a favourite son. At the very end I found myself wanting the villain, Brandin, to win rather than the obsessive prince, Alessan - just as Kay intends. Not that he does win, of course, we are playing by genre rules. I do have one slight caveat, though. Devin, the *jeune premier*, does find his heart being torn by the nobility of all around him rather too often for verisimilitude - this is a travelling musician who engages in a vigorous knee tremble with one of said noble souls very early on in the tale, another professional singer who knows all about using sex as a weapon! The magic, for once, seems worth the candle. When these magicians call on their powers it is to achieve things beyond their natural powers - no calling on Belfal to brew the next cuppa here! The magicians too, the good, the bad and the indifferent, are also touched by their talents, at once buoyed up and flawed by them, which makes a change from thinly disguised Gandalfs on the one hand and creatures so evil they give lessons to Satan on the other.

So, I found this an enjoyable read, surprisingly so. I expect it will appeal to devotees of Donaldson, Eddings *et al*, even if Kay has much less purple in his prose than most. I would also recommend it to anyone who normally fights shy of this genre. Mind you, it is LONG - which very length probably precludes a sequel, for which small mercy

Martin Taylor

City of Truth

James Morrow
Legend, 1990, 104pp, £9.99

The people of Veritas cannot tell lies. Gone are the social niceties that we take for granted. As a result of ferocious conditioning reinforced with electric shock treatment in a brutal rites of passage ceremony in early adolescence, they have to be totally frank in their interpersonal intercourse. Otherwise they suffer physically.

Politicians therefore have to admit to accepting kickbacks and chatting up a member of the opposite sex is a boorish, unsuitable affair, as one will inevitably be offensive. It also means menus feature dishes such as "Murdered Cow Sandwich". The protagonist, Jack Sperry, is an art critic. This means he assesses the truthfulness of works of art, including cinema films and either arranges for the lies to be excised, or for the work to be completely destroyed. One day he meets a woman, who will, of course, lead him astray and help him in his quest to cure his son of the deadly Xavier's Plague by making him believe the lie that he will get better.

I found the cruelly candid names (Camp Ditch-the-Kids etc.) amusing but liked little else. This attempt at a 1984 type dystopia uses its illustrious forbears almost as a plotting template and as a result it is both dull and predictable. The characters are merely puppets fulfilling pre-ordered plot functions. The action is set somewhere in the USA in a time not too dissimilar from our own, but while there are references to the preceding Age of Lies, there is no explanation of how the Victorian culture arose. The violent brainwashing seems old-fashioned and primitive.

My main problem was suspending disbelief. Orwell and Zamyatin both created utterly believable dystopias. Veritas is too cardboard to be real. The dissemblers' meeting which Sperry easily gatecrashes, is a corny, totally unbelievable set piece. Would the whole plan for a revolution really be revealed to a mass meeting?

Yet many of Morrow's images are very visual, which leads me to wonder whether he has chosen the wrong medium for his idea. Done graphically with an artist who has a good eye for detail, (the truthful product names cry out for this sort of treatment!) this could in fact be quite a taut story, as a written novella one hundred pages long, the plot is too thin and Morrow is not yet a good enough writer to maintain the reader's interest for this length.

Valerie Housden



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Time Journeys

Paul Halpern

McGraw-Hill, 1990, 153pp, £19.95

This is an oddity. For a start, it is non-fiction, which puts it in a minority among the books being reviewed in these pages. What's more, it is non-fiction written by a Professor of Mathematics and Physics at an American college, and published by an academic publisher. And yet it is very relevant to the interests of science fiction readers (and writers).

Paul Halpern is obviously interested in SF as well - at least, in the classic works of Wells, Verne, Heinlein and the like (I suspect he took one of those courses on SF common in American universities, that regard anything as modern as Larry Niven as far too racy to be discussed). **Time Journeys** is no textbook, but deals with many mysteries of time, such as why it flows in one direction and whether time travel is possible, at a level clearly intended for non-scientists, the sad thing is that, like so many academics, Halpern can't write to save his life. In the Preface of the book (the bit where the author sets out his stall with juicy tidbits to induce the casual reader, flipping through the pages at the back of the bookshop, to buy) the eye falls over the sentence "let us now examine the basic structure of the book". "No thanks," the casual reader is likely to cry as he runs from the shop, "let us do no such thing". But that would be a mistake.

In spite of its clumsy writing and plodding approach, including a propensity for saying the blindingly obvious, this is an intriguing and interesting volume. It has no real depth to it, but at least the author provides a fair number of references to other books and topics where you can find out more about the topics he skates lightly over (for which I can even forgive the fact that my name is spelled incorrectly in one of those citations). There's a little bit of history and a little bit of philosophy; but the meat of the book is the overview of time in the context of relativity and quantum mechanics, including Shrodinger's famous cat (or cats, if you believe the many worlds version of quantum theory) and the possibility of parallel universes.

Throughout, there are references and allusions to SF. But unlike the non-fiction references, these stop at about 1955. It is downright bizarre, for example, to find no mention of either Paul Anderson's **Tan Zero** or Fred Pohl's **The Coming of the Quantum Cats** in this context. And there are some odd omissions on the factual side, as well. Although he stresses that most physicists are uncomfortable with the many worlds notion, Halpern fails to point out that Stephen Hawking has espoused it in his theory of the origin (or lack of origin) of the Universe - even though, of course, **A Brief History of Time** gets a mention.

So - a strange book. Fascinating topic, with lots to ponder on, turgidly written, over priced and from an inappropriate publisher. I couldn't in all honesty, urge anyone to buy it for themselves. But you might look it out in a library, always assuming the local library has any money left for non-fiction books in these days of poll-tax-capping.

John Gribbin

Moving Pictures

Terry Pratchett

Gollancz, 1990, 279pp, £12.95

Better Than Life

Giant Naylor

Viking, 1990, 229pp, £13.99

Terry Pratchett has become something of an institution. **Moving Pictures** is the tenth Discworld novel and there is no sign of the apparently interminable stream ever coming to an end. There seems to be an almost insatiable demand for these rather lightweight comic fantasy novels and Pratchett's imagination seems fertile enough to keep the demand satisfied. How good is he really though?

Certainly **Moving Pictures** achieves everything it sets out to. The book is always entertaining and successfully sends up Hollywood and the American film industry, transposed to the Discworld... but it lacks bite. There is too much sugar and not enough acid. The humour is just not sharp enough. It flatters rather than hurts.

A good example of this fault is provided by Gaspode the Wonderdog, a canine who is blessed/cursed with self-awareness and the power of speech by the magic of the Discworld's Holy Wood. Gaspode realises what a dog's life really is. The humour that Pratchett squeezes from this situation is much too gentle. There is no real anger, no real sense of injustice. It is all fake. Complacency rules and a good idea becomes a missed opportunity.

For my money Pratchett is terribly overrated as an adult novelist. His books fall into Michael Moorcock's category of being written about and for rabbits! Tom Sharpe has nothing to worry about. Pratchett's children's books are much better.

What of the Rob Grant and Doug Naylor **Red Dwarf** novelisation? This is the second volume loosely based on the superb television series. It is different enough to be worth reading and there are a few good jokes, but it is nowhere near as good as the TV series, easily one of the best comedy shows on the box in recent years, in the same league as **Steptoe and Son**, **Porridge** and **The Young Ones**.

John Newsinger

Outnumbering the Dead

Frederik Pohl

Legend, 1990, 110pp, £9.99

Frederik Pohl's latest comes in the Legend novella series, and essentially rewrites **Love Story** into the future, changing the gender of its subjects on the way.

Rafiel, the protagonist, is the Laurence Olivier of his day; but where Olivier's relationship with Vivien Leigh supplied the gossip columns, Rafiel has the dual interest of affairs and his mortality. For in this future world an operation before birth ensures immortality for most people, but not for Rafiel: he can be repaired (this uncomfortable operation begins the book) but eventually a point will come where he will just stop dead.

The ironic counterpoint to this is the play **Rafiel** returns to rehearsal: Oedipus. So a reporter can quote Sophocles at him "no

mortal can ever be known to be happy until he is allowed to leave this life, until he is dead" and then ask him "Do you feel that way, Rafiel? I mean, as a mortal?" and literally mean it.

However, the lives of the future are decadent and shallow and although Rafiel is aware that the interest of many people is prurient and even spiteful, he is very much part of that world. The language is one of the theatrical demi-monde, with the use of a lot of French and foreign words, and generally the spirit of everyone being called "darling" or "love" without meaning a word of it. The return of lost love, the star surgeon Alcegrete, will save Rafiel, as they finally sail into the stars together and he dies, but the idea of love as salvation pairs very weakly with the purgatory of future life on earth.

Outnumbering the Dead is an old-fashioned novel in many ways, if old-fashioned can refer to styles and SF concepts that appeared fifty or even twenty-five years ago: decadence for its own sake is no longer treated as a worthwhile subject, but it certainly features here. On the other hand, Pohl may have meant to write about the loss of feeling and what causes that loss, and there are many echoes in this short book that make it deeper. It ends "yes, Rafiel had after all been happy in his life, and known that to be true", and just before the words of Sophocles in my dictionary of quotations comes these of Solon - "call no man happy till he dies, he is at best fortunate". Things do not seem to change though millennia pass.

Leslie J Hunt

Dinblg of Khimmur

Philip G Williams

Grafton, 1990, 375pp, £13.99

Dinblg is "a successful merchant-adventurer, spy, accomplished womaniser, and Foreign Minister to the Royal Court of Khimmur" - alas, I have always preferred fantasy where the protagonists earn their laurels rather than be granted them by auctorial fiat. Without such a history, at the centre of the novel one senses a motivational void - who is he? What does he care, and what do I care, about what happens next? Eighty pages in, very little having happened but much history having been sketched in, flooded with names and still puzzling over an ideologically dubious magically-assisted seduction, I lost interest. Skimming the rest, there is war and intrigue, The Beast, trouble in the spirit world - alas, I wrote something very similar ten years ago, and Williamson has not convinced me that his is substantially better. Given the choice, I prefer to sweat obsessively over my own.

Cecil Nurse

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Index to Books reviewed

| Author | Title | Page |
|---|---------------------------------------|------|
| ALDERMAN, Gill | The Land Beyond | 16 |
| BRADLEY, Marion/ MAY, Julian/ NORTON, Andre | Black Trillium | 15 |
| BUTCHER, William | Verne's Journey to the Centre of Self | 18 |
| CONSTANTINE, Storm | Hermitech | 14 |
| DONNELLY, Joe | Stone | 20 |
| DOZOIS, Gardner (Ed) | Best New SF 4 | 17 |
| FERRING, David | Shadowbreed | 18 |
| GARNETT, Rhys/ ELLIS R J (Eds) | Science Fiction Roots and Branches | 16 |
| GUEST, Diane | Lullaby | 18 |
| HALPERN, Paul | Time Journeys | 22 |
| HARRIS, Steve | Adventureland | 15 |
| HOLDSTOCK, Robert | The Bone Forest | 18 |
| HOLT, Robert & Frank | Peace Maker | 17 |
| JAMES, Peter | Sweet Heart | 20 |
| JONES, Neil/ PRINGLE, David | Deathwing | 21 |
| JONES, Stephen/ CAMPBELL, Ramsey (Eds) | Best New Horror | 17 |
| JORDAN, Robert | The Eye of the World | 20 |
| KAY, Guy Gavriel | Tigana | 21 |
| KERR, Katherine | Polar City Blues | 16 |
| MANN, Phillip | Wulfsyarn | 19 |
| MCQUINN, Donald E | Warrior | 20 |
| MORRELL, David | The Covenant of the Flame | 20 |
| MORROW, James | City Of Truth | 21 |
| NAYLOR, Grant | Better Than Life | 22 |
| PHILLIPS, Patricia | The Scientific Lady | 19 |
| POHL, Frederik | Outnumbering the Dead | 22 |
| PRATCHETT, Terry | Eric | 14 |
| PRATCHETT, Terry | Moving Pictures | 22 |
| SHAW, Bob | The Shadow of Heaven | 17 |
| STEED, Neville | Hallowes' Hell | 18 |
| STEELE, Allen | Clarke County, Space | 14 |
| SWANWICK, Michael | Griffin's Egg | 15 |
| WATSON, Ian | Inquisitor | 21 |
| WILLIAMSON, Philip G | Dinbig of Khimmur | 22 |
| WILSON, F Paul | Reborn | 15 |
| YEOVIL, Jack | Krokodil Tears | 18 |

Best Short Fiction: 1990

By Kev McVeigh

In some areas of the short story field 1990 was a quieter year than '88 or '89, but overall the quantity and quality of short SF continued to rise. The lull in single-author collections was inevitable after the previous year, but the **Pulphouse Authors Choice** series offset this and made stories by the likes of Effinger, Shiner, Goldstein and Bryant available again. Elsewhere, Eric Brown's **The Time Lapsed Man and Other Stories** spread his growing reputation further; Orson Scott Card's **Maps In A Mirror** is an enormous resume for one of the '80s most popular authors; and Pat Murphy's **Points Of Departure** would be the highlight of any year.

There were also several interesting anthologies, second volumes of **Zenith** and **Full Spectrum** and the reincarnated **Universe** all had great stories - whilst those who put their respective prejudices aside found much to enjoy in the **Warhammer** anthologies, the **Semiotext(e)** SF edition, Lisa Tuttle's impressive collection of Women's Horror, **The Skin of The Soul** and David V Barrett's **Digital Dreams**.

With the magazines doing well - a monthly **Interzone**, a fast-developing small press led by **BBR** - there were plenty of stories around, but which were the best? They came from a variety of sources and covered a wide range of styles, but some outstanding stories were obvious. Several of the prominent names of recent years were less prolific this year, Connie Willis, Ian McDonald, Lucius Shepard and Pat Murphy, but many newer names established themselves - Greg Egan, R Garcia y Robertson, Paul Di Fillipo, Kathe Koja and Janet Kagan amongst them.

Greg Egan is a new name but one which cropped up in several places, particularly **Interzone**, where his best story, the deeply-disturbing "Learning to be Me" stood out. For a while, it seemed as if every issue of **Interzone** had either Egan, or Kim Newman. The latter's "The Original Dr. Shade" received great praise for its dark vision. The same issue, however, contained my personal favourite: Simon D Ing's "The Braining of Mother Lamprey" is an absurd fantasy with some wonderful images, and great wit. One of the funniest short stories I've read in a long time.

Equally funny, equally dark and considerably

stranger, was **BBR** 17's 12-page centrefold catalogue Incunabula Press' 1990/91 Catalogue lists with commentary 27 books or items of scientific or political interest about parallel worlds, their access and the cover-up conspiracy. Seriously weird, dangerously intriguing. Only the small print gives any explanation.

BBR also published Paul DiFillipo's "Fleshflowers", an enjoyable sequel to his earlier story "Skintwister" (**F&SF** March '86); the author also had "Harlem Nova" in **Amazing**, which features more gentle homage to Delany with some sound political comment and a post-cyberpunk adventure "One Night in Television City" in **Universe**. Few writers are as convincing as DiFillipo when it comes to street life and talk.

Karen Joy Fowler's neat little stories have been a high priority for me for some time now and "Lieserl" (**Asimov's**) could be her best yet. It is the story of Einstein's daughter, told through the letters he receives from her mother, but the real strength of the story is the manner in which Relativity Theory is incorporated into both text and structure, to make the story far less straightforward and more moving than it first seems.

Allen Steele has yet to convince me with his novels, but stories such as the dinosaur story "Trembling Earth" (**Asimov's**) show that he can write very well. Similarly I prefer James Patrick Kelly's shorter work, though the weird and fascinating "Mr. Boy" (**Asimov's**) is novella length. And Bruce Sterling (who gives Tim Powers a walk-on part in "The Sword of Damocles" (**Asimov's**)) endeavours to enter Hermetic territory with "The Shores of Bohemia" in **Universe**. It is good to see established novelists continuing with the short forms, the temptation to stretch good stories to novel length must be there, yet the results of such expansion rarely match the original.

Looking through the magazines to remind myself of the best stories I see that there is still so much I have to read, so many promising stories by Greg Benford, Kim Stanley Robinson, Ursula LeGuin, Philip Jose Farmer and Pat Cadigan, that I can say with absolute certainty that 1990 was a very good year for excellent short SF.