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Geoff
Ryman
Interview

Eva
Hauser
Biopunk

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Front Line Dispatches

Readers Letters

Update

From Nicola Griffith, Atlanta, Georgia

I enjoyed reading the interview: Carol Ann did a good job of transcribing my ramblings. However I would like to add one footnote. When the interview went to press, I was still undergoing various medical tests; the results of those tests are now in, and I have multiple sclerosis. Ack. I'm doing fine... But I'm in the market for a cool-looking walking stick. If anyone has any ideas, let me know.

Clarke Award

From David Bell, North Kelsey

I am not impressed by John Clute's criticisms of the Arthur C Clarke Award to *Body of Glass*. I've heard some of the rumours that various people in the publishing industry are offended by the judges' choice, even to the point of withdrawing financial support for such incidentals as the awards ceremony. Only John Clute is prepared to put his name to any criticisms, with nothing more significant otherwise than a vague account of audience reaction on the night of the award ceremony. Stripped of the emotional verbiage, John Clute comes uncomfortably close to saying that the definition of SF should be based on what the SF publishers (whoever they might be) choose to label and sell as SF. I can't help wondering just who is pulling his strings.

I cannot comment on the obvious question of whether *Body of Glass* is the best book. I haven't read any of the short-listed books, and nothing I've read so far tempts me to read any of them. If it is the best SF novel published in 1992 the publishers have nothing to complain

about, and the collective senior editors referred to by John Clute are doing nothing more than passing the buck. If it is not, as John Clute claims, then I for one would like to know a little more about how the judges are selected, and how the panel has changed over the years.

I've no particular problems with the ideas of "wild-card" entries, though I have doubts about the way in which a major publishing company such as Penguin Books was given such an apparently inside track. Would John Clute have objected if it had been a very small publisher, unwilling to risk entering books in the normal way?

I also wonder if the Arthur C Clarke Award has a sufficiently high profile, when there are so many rather parochial literary awards. I can understand why an outside company might not emphasise it to the public in the way that they would some other awards, though it can be argued that a high-profile literary award like the Booker Prize is just as narrow-minded and parochial as any award for genre fiction. But the Booker Prize is much bigger, and gets reported on TV, and seems hyped-up out of all proportion to its importance.

I am far more worried by the relationship between the publishers and the award. John Clute seems to be suggesting that, apart from the actual prize to the author, the award is dependant on the financial support of a limited number of publishers. These companies have a commitment to SF and are prepared to cover the incidental costs of such things as the award ceremony. So far, fair enough. He then goes on to say that this support should be taken into account by the judges. "They clearly felt they'd had their money taken, and their time wasted, under false pretences." While John Clute says elsewhere that it was right for the judges to discount Arthur C Clarke's public support for one of the

shortlisted books, he seems to suggest that the judges should not have discounted the less public money that the publishers paid out. Are the publishers complaining because they couldn't buy the judges? Did they really think that, because they had paid for some of the frills, one of the "publishers seriously involved in SF publishing" should have won?

It wouldn't surprise me to hear that Arthur C Clarke is disappointed that *Red Mars* didn't win the award. I hope that he is deeply offended by the suggestion that the judges should not have chosen *Body of Glass* because the publisher did not make any financial contribution. Whatever the merits of John Clute's arguments on the quality of the shortlisted books, the structure is based on morally corrupt foundations and thus casts doubt on the basis of all the rumours and other unattributable statements that are floating around.

From Lisa Tuttle, Argyll

Some people are totally opposed to literary awards and after reading Maureen Speller's 'Judge's Summary of the Clarke Award' in *Vector 173* I find myself feeling inclined that way. I was pleased when *Lost Futures* was shortlisted for the Clarke Award, yet after reading this summary I felt embarrassed. If my novel was as weak as this judge thought it then what was it (or the McDonald, or the Russo) doing on the list? Say what you like about the Booker or other mainstream literary awards, but you don't hear the judges talking about the contenders as if they were a set of hurdles to be leaped and all, save the triumphant winner, had stumbled at least once. A reason for despising awards is because it can imply not that there has been a difficult and somewhat arbitrary choice of "best" among individual works of art, but rather that there is one clear winner amid a field of losers. Thanks a lot. We're not in competition when we write, and Ian McDonald, Marge Piercy, Kim Stanley Robinson, Richard Paul Russo, Michael Swanwick, Sue Thomas, Connie Willis and myself were all setting different tasks for ourselves, attempting different things, and succeeding or failing, in our different ways.

I am in favour of awards when they serve to celebrate what is good and draw it to the attention of more readers; not when they create losers and bad feelings.

Writers get scolded when they respond to negative reviews, I know, but I was horrified by Maureen's misreading of *Lost Futures*. She's welcome to dislike it, and I'm willing to accept that my attempt to explain the connection between dreaming and alternate universes has failed miserably, or even that I've written trashy soap opera, yet I do think that a judge for a literary award should read with sufficient attention to notice that Luz comes not from the future but -- like all of Clare Beckett's other selves -- from a contemporaneous alternate reality. Also, at the end (which is *not* as a superficial reader

might assume, set in her "baseline reality" nor is there any such thing as a baseline reality in this book) the man she meets is not just any old romantic figure -- his identity is extremely important. He's a kind of personification of her own gut-feelings, having been the boy she was dallying with when she might have been saving her brother's life -- that she is able to recognize him now is a result of all she has been through and a sign of how she has changed. A sexual reconciliation is suggested, but I thought I'd clearly signposted that his importance lies far more in his work as a dream researcher in the present and his connection with her unhappy past than in any potential he might hold as a future mate.

I hope no one thinks I thought **Lost Futures** should have won the award. I did not imagine, in a year in which both **Red Mars** and **Doomsday Book** were published, that it had a chance, and I was genuinely flattered when I heard it had been proposed. I also thought **Correspondence** a possible "dark horse" winner, and I haven't read the highly-praised **Stations of the Tide**. I am ready and willing to be convinced that the judges decided, after the manner of judges everywhere, that for a variety of reasons **Body of Glass** was the best of all. Maureen Speller's summary does not convince me of that; its defensive, rather sniping tone, leaves me feeling very uneasy. If the only way to find a winner is to find fault with the opposition -- and I can hardly believe the pettiness of some of it -- how many points knocked off for calling a scarf a muffler? How many demerits for writing about a subject too huge for one book and not "fully confronting" very issue, or for having a "baroque" writing style? There is a way of appreciating, and even celebrating the strengths of books with which one is not in total sympathy; people who find it impossible should not put themselves forward as judged of literary awards.

From Andy Mills, Hull

So that was what all the fuss was about! I thought that there must have been some dastardly chicanery at the very least, but no: it just seems the wrong book was chosen by the Arthur C Clarke Award judges.

It appears that there are two distinct issues which John Clute has raised and -- whilst I have some sympathy with his views -- I do feel that he has overreacted.

Issue number one is that the wrong book won because there were better novels around. Here we have book awards as beauty contests. I thought **Body of Glass** was a fine novel but that Fowler's **Sarah Canary** was a brilliant piece of work, approached only by Carroll's **After Silence**. But I wasn't on the jury. Other people have different opinions and good for them. If on the day the dazzling blonde who declares she wants to work with animals and bring peace to the world wins the pageant, then best of luck to her. The sultry, deep brunette who was overlooked for the first prize isn't any less beautiful for that, and

Sarah Canary isn't any less a great book because it cannot sport "Winner of the Arthur C Clarke Award" on its front cover.

Perhaps of more concern is the second issue, also raised by Colin Greenland in **Interzone** 73. This is that the wrong book won because it didn't belong to the British SF publishing stable, or (Greenland here) it wasn't won by an up-and-coming, needy British writer. This is a more serious issue and it worries me because it smacks of tokenism and deserving causes. It's the Clarke's award: if he decides it should go to the best British author, or first novel, or whatever, fair enough. But given the terms as they stand what are the jury to do? Give the award to the publishing house which provided them with the most books? Give it to a British novel even if it is evidently second-rank? (I'm not referring to any of the books on this year's short-list). Give it to a writer whose career needs the biggest boost? If it ever got to that stage, the Clarke Award -- or any other -- should surely be junked. As it is this argument merely goes to show how dodgy it is using the word "best" when comparing art-forms.

From Paul Kincaid, Folkestone

As someone who was, with John Clute, one of the judges in the first year of the Arthur C Clarke Award, I felt I should reply to some of the points he raises in his Guest Editorial in **Vector** 173.

Let me say straight away that I agree with him wholeheartedly. To my mind, Karen Joy Fowler's **Sarah Canary** should have been eligible for the award, and should have won.

But that aside, there is very little in his piece that I can agree with.

In the first place I should make a general point. Clute notes that the judges *did* include on their shortlist several books that are "centrally important texts in the SF of the 1990s". This, I would suggest, gives some cause to celebrate the taste of the judges -- whether or not you agree with their final choice from this shortlist, it is no justification for the crude and hysterical vituperation they have received from certain quarters. In the wake of the award I have witnessed and heard of behaviour which has sickened me, and this from people who are supposed to be the representatives of SF in this country. Clute has not been among them, but some of the points he makes have been central to their attack.

However, I shall try to be as methodical as Clute in this, and take his points one by one.

1) The Piercy was "in my view, an inherent non-winner of any prize" (my emphasis). This is clearly a matter of personal taste, as the choice of any prize winner is likely to be. I happen to have a different opinion, but then I suspect Clute does not regard the balance between what one might call the "literary" and the "sfnal" merits of a book in quite the same way that I would. The sfnal devices in the book may not have been in the first flush of youth, how many are, but to my mind they

were employed with assurance and to an overall effect that I found at least as pleasing as any of the other books on the shortlist.

2) Other shortlisted titles clearly show "something is happening" and Clute thinks "the panel of experts should have noticed this". They did. That was presumably why they shortlisted the books.

But if he means simply that these others were better books, we are back with personal opinion. I would agree that there are excellent books on the shortlist, whether any would have made a better winner is open to debate. The Russo and McDonald I haven't read, so will not comment upon. The Willis contained a convincing and unromantic portrait of a past time, but the SF device she employed is somewhat perfunctory and the near-future Oxfors she presents contains laughable errors. The Tuttle I have reviewed in **Vector**, and said there that it is an excellent book let down by an unfortunate ending. The Swanwick I found too lush and flowery for my taste, and not really convincing (I was out of sympathy with the book, but why should that stop me, Clute was clearly out of sympathy with the Piercy). The Thomas I found, if anything, the most satisfying of all the shortlisted books, but it is essentially a postmodernist exercise in destabilising the world and the SF element is almost incidental to this. The Robinson is big, thick, weighty and one-third of what may be the most important SF novel of the decade, though it doesn't always wear its considerable research as lightly as maybe it should. And I do have reservations about some aspects of the novel -- for instance, the murder which opens the book never achieves the importance as a fulcrum for political change within the world of the novel or plot developments within the structure of the book, which it is set up to have. (I am in a privileged position here, having read the second volume **Green Mars**; many of the flaws I felt were in the first book are resolved in this second which is, I think, the better book. But this only illustrates the dilemmajudges must face when considering the first volume of a closely integrated trilogy.)

3) "Market and publishing realities." Now we start to venture into extraordinary realms. Clute argues that because no representative of Piercy's publisher was at the award ceremony. It was "a slap in the face of SF as a mature communal endeavour". Rubbish! If there was a "slap in the face" it came from Michael Joseph, not from the prize or the judges. And therefore it can have no relevance to the award itself.

On a practical point, the winner was chosen before the ceremony, before the judges could have any idea who would or would not attend. Is Clute seriously suggesting that the judges should wait until the ceremony, and then choose the winner on the basis of who turned up? Wow, that sounds like a really serious award which will do wonders for the reputation of science fiction in this country.

He goes on: "They (the publishers) made it clear their feeling that -- whatever the motives

of the panel might have been -- it would look to the world as though the Clarke had been given to Marge Piercy because she seemed 'upmarket'. Now we get on to agendas, hidden or otherwise. To the best of my knowledge and belief the judges had only one agenda in choosing the winner: to select the book which they felt was the best SF novel of the year. But that clearly isn't enough. You can no longer choose the best, you have to drop anything which "looks" like it might be "upmarket". Maybe we should drop other things while we're at it, a little bit of censorship maybe? No, if that is the way the award should go, then it is a sham.

Clute next argues that because the publishers subsequently showed that they had no interest in promoting the Piercy as SF. It should not have won an SF award. In the first place this is specious reasoning, what a publisher does after an award can have no possible effect on the judging of that award. In the second, are we to say that only books written by recognised SF authors and published as SF by recognised SF publishers can be eligible? Apart from the fact that such criteria would have wiped out many winners and shortlisted Clarke books -- including *Sarah Canary* -- that is the most blatant piece of cliqueship I can remember in a long time.

Oh but what Clute is saying is more insidious and invidious than that. For he is saying that publishers use the award to market their books, he makes play of the amount that they spend in sending their books to the judges; and so, the argument is implied, the award should only go to books which can repay that investment. In other words, we are not talking about the Arthur C Clarke award for the Best SF Novel of the Year, which is what I thought Clute and I helped to set up. No, it should be the Arthur C Clarke Award for the most useful PR for a publisher.

Such an idea is an insult to everybody involved in SF in this country. A far greater insult than any that the awarding of the laurel to *Body of Glass* can possibly have caused.

4) "It is entirely proper that Clarke's enthusiasm for one particular book had no effect on the panel's decision."

I wish I could take that at face value. For at face value it is true. But Clarke's enthusiasm was for *Red Mars*, and Clute is rather partial to *Red Mars*. Yet, although (or rather because) the Award bears Clarke's name, if the decision were to be swayed by Clarke's blurb on a book it would devalue the award and rob Clarke's name of its integrity.

No, for the respect I have for John Clute's integrity, I shall assume that this suggestion is a joke.

From Scott Wills, Paisley

There have been times over the last eight years when I have disagreed or been annoyed with comments made, but until now I have not been incensed enough to put pen to paper.

What has angered me so much?

Maureen Speller's comments on the Clarke Award. Not on the award itself (though in my opinion John Clute's alternate world is more preferable to the real world) but to Maureen's description of *Destroying Angel*. She states "Tanner is a surprisingly decent sort of man to be an ex-cop in any historical period".

This strikes me as a very prejudiced and narrow minded statement. By this definition, are all cops and ex-cops not decent human beings?

Does Maureen really know enough (or any) cops or ex-cops to make such a wide sweeping statement?

If this sort of comment was made against any other ethnic, religious or professional group it would not be tolerated!

I feel Maureen Speller's comments personally offensive for reasons which by now should be blindingly obvious.

From Chris Bell, Bristol.

I always look forward to reading and unravelling John Clute's prose, and so read his guest editorial with great attention. As a direct result I read Marge Piercy's *Body of Glass* -- for which I owe thanks to Clute.

The result of the unravelling amounts to this: Page 1, and point 1): Clute didn't like this book as much as he liked the others on the shortlist.

Point 2): he didn't think it was as "important" as some of the others.

Point 3):(a) the publishers who didn't win were unhappy that an outsider got the prize
b) Penguin didn't hype *Body of Glass* as SF, but as *haute SF* and as *much more than science fiction* which Clute feels to be "condescending".

Point 4): Arthur C. Clarke may or may not have some opinion about this.

To which I would respond as follows:

1) The ref needs glasses.

2) So does the umpire.

3) a) The other trainers were choked when Foinavon won the Grand National.

b) *Red Mars* does mention "genre" on the cover...

Destroying Angel -- "a gripping thriller"

Stations of the Tide -- "a novel"
Doomsday Book -- "... A moving work of the imagination"

Correspondence -- "breaks the boundaries of conventional fiction"

Lost Futures has "Tuttle manages to combine the restless, biting curiosity of a natural SF writer with an ability to project real feeling" (unlike the genre hacks, probably)

Hearts, Hands and Voices is (phew) "a haunting work of science fiction"

4) Clute would like us to agree with him that Clarke would agree with Clute.

Insight

From Stephen Rothwell Basingstoke

Insight is aptly titled, only in **Vector** 173, the insight was one in Steve Palmer's mind: the Channel 4 series **New Nightmares** seems to have dovetailed quite neatly with his world view.

In cases like this, could I ask for some sort of editorial preface or introduction to the article, setting out the authors experience and qualifications, and maybe if necessary, some sort of warning or disclaimer along the lines of: "Opinions expressed by individual authors do not represent the views of the BSFA..."

This is because, scattered through the article were several sweeping statements which, without some form of supporting evidence, or justification, or background, I feel I must take with a substantial pinch of salt.

For example, I noticed "the internal splitting of peoples psyches due to their inability to experience themselves fully." And "the crowd is only inherently fascist... When its individuals are inauthentic." And "...The inauthentic human mind". These -- particularly the use of the word 'inauthentic' -- sound to me like jargon and imply that Steve Palmer has qualifications or some

knowledge of psychology or sociology. If so I'd like to know, so that I can give these statements some credence. If on the other hand, he has no such education and is merely an armchair psychologist then my judgement is, unfortunately, that he's just spouting pompous rubbish.

Please could someone let me know if there's any basis for some of these statements?

If there is, then while I agree with the idea that you should treat your readership as intelligent and educated, I also think you should not assume that they know everything you do and thus be able to understand the background of references like those I've quoted. I really do need an explanation before I can accept them at face value.

Also, in that case, my apologies to Steve.

Much worse however, is: "Correctly starting from the now recognised point that our scientific view of the world, based as it is on eighteenth century doctrines of separateness and objectivity, is defunct...". Well excuse me, but I don't see it that way, and I'll take more to make me believe that than just reading a bald assertion.

This last example is especially aggravating because it is so unscientific as to be almost immune from any sort of contradiction other than saying "It ain't so". Is Steve Palmer saying that the entire scientific method is defunct? Is he talking about the trendy concept of the observer in quantum physics when he refers to "separateness"? Is he referring to the complex interactions of ecological systems? Chaos? This sentence does need to be justified.

As a professional physicist, can I make a plea for rational argument, backed up with

facts whenever possible, rather than articles full of dubious opinions and *non sequiturs*.

I'd also like to challenge the assumption that Western technological society equals lack of emotion equals fascism and genocide. And that primitive equals well-balanced and sane and decent. I thought that the idea of the noble savage had been knocked on the head - but then I'm not an anthropologist am I?

It seems to be that it is generally the technological West where there are concepts of human-- and animal -- rights, civil liberties, justice and democracy, and that the third world has some of the worst abuses of human rights, racism, and religious fundamentalism, and environmental problems like deforestation. (Are we just exporting our worse traits? How?)

It also seems to me that Western liberal ideas grew in parallel with the growth of scientific thought and technology. (Of course, if people are not worried about starvation they can afford to worry about their rights and their environment.)

What about the practices of some "primitive" tribes: ritual torture in New Guinea, headhunting, witch doctors and female circumcision in Africa, treatment of women as property?

We're not perfect here in the West, but we're not so bad considering the alternatives. A major effect of technology has been to enable evil to be committed on a larger scale, not to promote evil. But then we can do good on a larger scale as well.

A final point about "emotional intelligence". Surely hate is emotional, bigotry and prejudice emotional, the desire for vengeance emotional. I find it curious to blame ethnic cleansing on peoples failure to experience emotions, let alone blame that failure on technological society. (What is the mechanism? Where is the evidence that we are less emotional? How would you measure that?)

Catie, I think that **Vector** has potential to do better than the last **Insight**, as I know there are lots of talented and qualified BSFA members who might provide articles. I like to be entertained, but I also like to be educated, and I don't think I'm being educated by reading outpourings of personal prejudices. Steve Palmer is right that knowledge is not understanding, but a few facts go a lot further to developing understanding than swallowing other peoples unjustified opinion.

I also know Steve Palmer is capable of better -- I've read some of his writings-- and I think you could have done a better job of editing.

Sorry to be negative, but I really did take exception to a lot in that article.

(NB I never edit opinions -- Catie)

From Jim England

I thought that Steve Palmer's column **Insight**, in **Vector** 173 was the best he's done so far. As he says, AI generally seems to be discussed only in terms of simulating the computational and scientific skills of human

beings, hardly ever in terms of simulating their emotional and instinctive attributes. Of course "intelligence tests" don't measure the latter, but AI enthusiasts tend to think of future AIs as being superior to human beings in more than performance in these tests.

The speculations of William Gibson and others as to what consciousness would be like if it could be disembodied seem to show a kind of mental blindness, often associated with cerebral habits of thought. A similar kind of blindness is shown by those who see out-of-the-body experiences as evidence for the existence of a soul. It may not be too extreme an analogy to suggest that AI enthusiasts who think that the important attributes of human beings can be 'downloaded' into an inorganic machine are like people who think that something with all the important properties of water could be manufactured without hydrogen or oxygen!

Later on, I found some of Steve's hints confusing. When he refers to "supposedly humane eugenics programmes", it's hard to believe that he would not approve of them in any form his support for bacteria was not explained. His reference to the "inauthentic human mind" was mystifying. (Is it OK to kill people whose minds are inauthentic?) And surely he's wrong about solo aliens rarely appearing in SF -- what about the countless tales of aliens crash-landing on Earth, etc? It was a thought-provoking article, though.

STMA

From Philip Muldowney, Plymouth

Is it a Hen?
Is it a Duck?
Is it a Turkey?

No, methinks it is an Albatross, which when finished soaring on the winds of the tempest in a teacup, will land on the shoulders of the Clarke award, and lie heavy there, for some appreciable time. Given the tempting trailers in last **Vector**, I expected dark dark deceit, and at least ten dead bodies before the fat lady sings. The reality is more prosaic. I went out and bought **Body of Glass**, on seeing that it won the Clarke award, not knowing any of the nature of the controversy that there had been. It is the first novel in a long time, that I have failed to finish -- even on the fourth attempt. Worthy and wordy, terminally turgid, and ultimately boring. It is seemingly no accident that the only sniff of any appreciation it has had, was an English award. Cause in some ways, it did feel a bit English, or is it just that the nearest experience of boredom I have had, was trying to finish Dickens's **Little Dorrit**.

Maureen Speller's was as competent as she always is. She spelled out the various virtues and vices of the nominees, very clearly. Yet when it came down to the nitty-gritty -- actually explaining why **Body of Glass** won, I think she copped out a bit. In the end, her only reason was that the judges thought it was the best... But for me at least, I

still do not understand why.

I found myself nodding in agreement with John Clute through the first two thirds of his article. After all, I thought **Red Mars** was a terrific book, and it is always so much easier to agree with one's own prejudices! It was when he came to his third point, the Market and Publishing Realities that I found myself disagreeing with him violently. If his line of argument is followed, the judges should make their minds up with half an eye on the promotional hype and money from the publishers then the whole thing becomes a farce. As a reader, I object to this most strongly. If the impartiality of the judgement is overruled by the publishing hype, then the award becomes completely valueless. In fact it would probably have a negative effect. If you have an elitist judging system, then you end up with some idiosyncratic results, perhaps this is the price that you pay for impartiality. On the other hand, the populist system, i.e. The Hugo has certainly had its share of turkeys in the past couple of years.

The whole brou-ha-ha raises a number of questions about the value of awards. Awards in SF over the past decade, have multiplied like leaves on the trees, and their very multiplicity makes them less effective. This is not just in our narrow field, from the Booker to the Turner, the motto seems to be. If you want to promote something, then give an award with all the hype and fanfare you can muster. The true merit to the winner of an award seems to diminish in direct proportion to the amount of money and publicity given to it. Has the Clarke award been somewhat railroaded by this process? Special presentation at the Groucho Club, the author's brother in person, special gathering of the great and good in the British SF community... In the end are we all prisoners of PR?

Pigeon holing? But then, is not that what you are doing by your reviewing criteria? Most of the reviews in **Paperback Graffiti** tend to be shorter, and of less depth than those in **First Impressions**. In this issue **First Impressions** reviews 23 books in 8 pages, **Paperback Graffiti** reviews over 50 books in 11 pages, where the more detailed analysis? I agree, that the purpose of **Paperback Graffiti** is to provide shorter reviews of a greater number of books. However, with the unpredictable nature of publishing formats now, there are books appearing in **Paperback Graffiti** that deserve more space devoted to them, because they are significant books which have not been reviewed in **Vector** before.

I so much agree with Paul Kincaid over the Science Fiction Encyclopedia! It is a truly monumental achievement, and deserves every single bit of praise that is heaped upon it. I bought it when it came out, and have been mining it ever since. We are very fortunate indeed to have a reference work that encompasses the whole field so well. There are few others that I can think of in other fields that can hold a candle to it. Congratulations and thanks to Peter Nicholls, John Clute, Brian Stableford and all the assembled company. A brilliant job.

I found Freda Warrington's letter interesting, especially when she raises the point of responding to reviews. Surely, if you raise your voice in an open forum like **Vector's** letter column, then you must expect some replies. Is that not the nature of debate? Freda's original letter seemed more heat than light, and did not really do what she had to say any justice. The letter here was so much more enlightening.

The Nicola Griffith interview was again, another interesting piece. She makes that chance for a first novel sound so easy though! The big-white-editor-chief just asked me if I was writing anything at novel length! Serendipity... One of the best interviews that you have carried, it was a change to get a look at the person behind, and not just upfront about the next project the interviewee is engaged on. The news of her illness added a strange wistfulness to the whole, and that last codicil sounded very sad indeed. I hope it is not too patronising to wish her a better future, she certainly needs it.

The reviews in **Vector** are a hugger-mugger breed. On reading through them all, the greatest impression one gets, is that there are too many reviewers. In this issue for instance, there must be reviews by approaching forty people. That is a lot of different voices and styles, which often makes the reviewing area a little cacophonous, there are too many voices drowning each other out. In most reviewazines, there seems to be a small cadre of reviewers doing a number of books each. Whereas **Vector** takes the populist option and farms them out wholesale. While this system encourages participation, and does get the books reviewed, its inherent weakness is that of the lowest common denominator. As a reader one must be impressed with the changes in quality that you have made in some areas of **Vector**, but if **Vector** is to get that one notch higher in quality, then the reviewing area needs to be tackled, because a proportion are really not good enough. The wooden spoon for this issue must belong to Ian Sales' review of **Labyrinth of Night** by Allen Steele. He picks out two factual faults, dismisses the rest of the book with a couple of very thin and prejudiced paragraphs and admits the coup-de-grace "This book is complete bollocks". How is that for a reasoned cogent conclusion? It is a bad review which helps the reader in no way at all. If the standard of reviews were upped from the amateurish dismissal, then **Vector** would be all the much stronger.

Shelley Syndrome

From Mike Sullivan, Yeovil

Science fiction films suffer abominably from Mary Shelley Syndrome

I make this statement having just been to see **Jurassic Park** at my local cinema, and having recently rented (the abysmal) **Universal Soldier** from my local video store.

The special effects of **Jurassic Park** were

unbelievable.

Marvellous.

The plot, distilled from Michael Crichton's novel with all the more cerebral portions surgically removed (sadly in order to attract more film-goers) followed the most worn out S.F. Storyline in existence: To wit the above syndrome.

Man makes scientific advance.

Man loses control of scientific advance

Man pays price.

Scientific advance either has to be destroyed (**Frankenstein**), or more commonly these days, is left in a suitably undestroyed state for the inevitable lucrative sequel(s).

The moral is basically a reinforcement of the biblical message from the book of Genesis.

Because Adam ate the apple of knowledge, mankind suffered the wrath of the Creator. Instead of living indefinitely in a garden paradise, we get sick, become old and infirm and eventually die. To cap this off, we have to work for a living. All because *homo sapiens* got too big for his boots and tried to acquire knowledge, to make himself better, to make an advance by some self-devised endeavour.

All such things are therefore, by extension fundamentally wrong and mankind should always be punished for any further such tamperings. Hence **Frankenstein**, **Usool**, **The Fly** et al. "Naughty mankind. Don't play with things you were not meant to. It will only end in tears just like it did in the Garden Of Eden".

What drivel; but how worrying that this theme is so often repeated when the truth of the matter is that we owe the quality of life that we enjoy today entirely to the great scientists of the past who make just such awful, terrible, evil, human knowledge enhancing endeavours.

These men and women were heroes, not monsters.

Isn't it time that the ghost of **Frankenstein** was exorcised once and for all, and stopped endlessly reconvincing our children that scientists are all just a bunch of irresponsible maniacs whose works will always and inevitably end up, killing its creator and any people who happen to get in the way? Provided of course they are not nauseatingly cute kids, a heroine of professional model standard beauty, or the indestructible-hero-figure-who-said-right-from-the-start-that-the-abominable-creation-should-be-destroyed-and-always-gets-the-girl.

The Best

From Cy Chauvin, Detroit, Michigan

Thank you for **Vector** 172. I've been meaning to write to say how much I believe it has improved. I enjoyed particularly the section on the Year's Best Books: I've actually read some of those listed, and the comments make some of the others sound interesting too. When there is so much published, and so little of it original -- when even the huge number of reviews in **Vector** and elsewhere seem too

overwhelming to read, an article like "The Best of 1992" is a real godsend. (I enjoy reading reviews of books, but usually not until after I've read the book).

Martyn Taylor's comments on **Was** (a book I've actually read) made me dig through back issues of **Vector** to find his original review and Helen Bland's letter commenting on it. I don't know if I can possibly deal with all the issues they raise in the space of one air-letter, but I'll try.

Like Martyn, I was disappointed in the novel, but felt absorbed and compelled to finish it. Not only because of Geoff Ryman's technical skills as a writer, but because I kept hoping and expecting that there would be a 'conceptual breakthrough': someone climbing out of the familiar Aristotelian spheres and finding a totally different universe outside. Someone dropping a house and landing in Oz. Or finding wonder in any form that wasn't totally squashed by disappointment or failure. My favourite bits were mostly second-hand: authorial childhood reminiscences about the first tv broadcasts of **A Wizard of Oz** in Canada, the old Dorothy Gale in a mental home, the boy she met as a child on the farm. I obviously expected something the author didn't intend to give: some measure of fantasy. I think the novel, by the very theme and images and trappings the author chose, encouraged readers to expect this.

I can't imagine why Helen Bland or Martyn Taylor would think AIDS is an important part of **Was** (well maybe Martyn doesn't): madness surely is an important disease, infecting several of the characters. Can anyone really imagine that when Geoff Ryman sat down to write this novel, he thought "Now I'm really going to write a major novel about AIDS"?

Helen Bland in her letter also calls authors such as Ryman, Delany, M. John Harrison, and Lisa Tuttle the "adult fantasy" writers of today. "Most of us have always 'blamed' Tolkien without quite knowing how it happened" Helen Bland writes, describing the state of traditional fantasy. "Who would honestly claim that most of the contemporary fantasy writing is in any way adult?" she adds.

My problem is with the word "adult", used as a sort of critical term. (Helen does say it has dubious connotations, perhaps connecting the term 'adult' with pornography.) Some children's fiction has great power and originality. **Was** mines the fantasy from our childhood. It's why Jonathan goes on his trip. We are really all tired of the unoriginal novels, and they're unfun, but neither adult *nor* childish, but bad. And I at least applaud when writers like Ellen Kushner in **Swordpoint** use the traditional genre elements in a fresh and witty way and with great style. I think what I want, each time I pick up a book, is to find one fresh and new: to read it as I did as a child, intensely, because it was all new to me then, unknown, virgin, undulled by the grind and dust of experience.

Please publish more "Best of --" lists, and thanks for a good read.

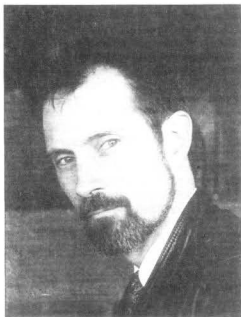
And He

And she was drifting through the backyard
And she was taking off her dress
And she was moving very slowly
Rising up above the earth
Moving into the universe
Drifting this way and that
Not touching the ground at all

'And She Was' Talking Heads

Was...

Geoff Ryman Interviewed by Kev McVeigh



Amidst the bustle of an Eastercon, Geoff Ryman is probably the most relaxed person in view. Despite his Guest of Honour status, and the subsequent demands on his time by an assortment of fans and colleagues, he is able to sit patiently in a hotel corridor whilst I run around frantically seeking to borrow a cassette recorder for this interview. I've also lost most of my notes, and I'm feeling ill, but we get started, and Geoff helps by being himself and it's easy after that.

Geoff Ryman's newest novel *Was...* is being promoted here, though it isn't science fiction. In the past he has told Paul Kincaid in *Vector* that he prefers the realistic aspects of his work, but needs a fantasy element as a kick off...

"I think it's still got a fantasy kick off in that the trick of mind that I've got still finds a lot of meaning in *The Wizard of Oz*. It was maybe that acting as a fantasy kick off for me, but it also comes from my own experience of books

behaving as living things. If there is a main character in *Was...*, it is the spirit, the *geist* that is Oz, and its engendering in the American West. So if you think of the book as a living thing that is the main character, then the different expressions of that *geist* in the book from and in the movie form and in the minds of the people who see it or read it, are what it means.

Both the book and the film are classics in a way, and on ideological grounds I'd prefer the book. One of the reasons the film is a classic is that it's more respectable. It relieves tension in a way which keeps the system going whereas the book is far less acceptable to librarians and educators and always has been."

I'd heard that it was banned in some states? Geoff refutes this, but the truth is no less dark for that.

"Librarians tended not to stock it and to deny its existence, and they tended not to put it on shelves for a long time. the story is that

it's partly because if they bought one they'd have to buy the whole series, but it's also this: Gore Vidal wrote a very interesting piece about Oz, and he quotes the head librarian of the City of Detroit. It's quite a scurrilous attack on the Oz books as cowardly, negative, turning away from the realities of life, and as Vidal points out, it was no accident that this was Detroit and they needed people to go and work in the car plants."

Was... contains at least three stories: that of a young girl named Dorothy whose family troubles come to the attention of a keen young teacher called Frank Baum; that of the young Judy Garland before and during the making of the film of *The Wizard of Oz*; and finally, the story of a young actor inspired by the film to seek out the roots of Dorothy. These are the core of the novel.

"Fortunately I didn't do my section on Frank L. Baum's life in the Old West. First of all because I couldn't get hold of a lot of the biographical material needed to do that in sufficient detail; and second, because I knew there was already a wonderful movie about his life called *The Dreamer of Oz*, scripted by Richard Madison, so I thought I would leave that out.

There is also a lot I left out about Judy Garland because there is always the danger with Oz and Judy Garland that you'll get sidetracked into doing a 'Judy book'. In New York, some of the people who were thinking of publishing it, were thinking of publishing it as a 'gay novel'.

OK, I'm gay and there are gay characters in the book, but I didn't consider I was writing a book for gay people and about the gay experience. I felt I'd been able to sketch some of the sources of sadness in Judy Garland's life without having to go through the whole miserable process of what she eventually ended up being; ie not a well person. It's all documented in her biographies, time and time again, and I didn't see much point in taking the story further than I did: actually making the movie.

Also I wanted her mother to have a word in edgeways because she really did say some terrible things about her mom. And I thought this book has been terribly anti-adult so I think I'll let the adults have a say, so it's not all onesided."

The iconography of the "gay scene" is a curious phenomenon. Geoff's interest in Judy Garland is rooted in his interest in Dorothy and both book and film, but elsewhere there are a number of bizarre gay idols: Yootha Joyce, the Beverly sisters, Kylie... as well as Judy Garland.

"Nobody knows why that is. I don't think she's a particular icon in gay life now. Maybe twenty years ago but not now. And twenty years from now they'll be looking at certain TV science fiction shows and they'll treat them with a similar mixture of affection and derision. It's a bit like watching some of the worst

episodes of Star Trek. You love them, and yet you know they're dumb at the same time.

I find that whole aspect of gayness tedious, I don't really believe it. None of my gay friends are into any of that. It's just a kind of thing we're supposed to be into, people who allow themselves to be suckered into being camp... they act a part, it's a preordained identity and it's easier to accept that preordained identity than to fight it and come up with one of your own."

There is one aspect of gay life which does matter to Geoff. AIDS in literature is still to a large extent written about by gay men: Armistead Maupin, Adam Mars-Jones, Samuel R Delany. AIDS plays a significant part in **Was...** too.

"It's played a significant part in the last two books. **The Child Garden** was sort of response to AIDS. It was interesting how quickly a virus could engender fear and immediate political effects. When I was writing **The Child Garden** I was also working on a lot of government publicity about AIDS. There are some interesting difficulties in getting the message across. Far more confusion than people realise. It wasn't just embarrassment about how to write about sex. These were very complicated issues about who should take a test and who shouldn't. The message they wanted to get across was, quite rightly: if you think you're at risk, you should take about taking a test. Is there anything you can do, having taken a test, that is any different from what you should be doing now? That is not having unsafe sex, and taking care of your health. Certain categories, like women who were thinking of becoming pregnant who might be HIV+ needed to take the test, because you need that information to make a decision. We were trying to help in leaflets like that, but we found that something like an article in *Time Out* did it so much better because they were freer to do it.

The rates of infection are now telling a different story, but in terms of actual cases; people who have been touched by it directly are much more likely to be gay men. I've had a lot of friends who've died of it. It's no longer the great terrifying shibboleth it was when I first heard about it ten years ago. It is a normal fact of life to which one has adjusted. I've been very lucky because compared to others, I've lost very few people, but it is now part and parcel of the gay community's social life, helping people with AIDS, helping them cope, or taking political stances which might help them.

I've no doubt in years to come there will be a lot of AIDS stereotypes in bad fiction, but right now the reality is that if the character isn't stereotyped then it won't be part of a stereotype. A situation is a situation, there is nothing individual about a virus (although with this one every strain is completely different). What is individual is its progress through people and how people cope with it. It's true that when I visited Angels in America they said you're going to find this a lot like

Was... and it was. The book is a mixture of history and individual people with AIDS experiences."

The three strands of **Was...** contain a great deal of pain, Dorothy suffers much trauma and abuse; Judy Garland's tragedy is a matter of record; and Jonathan is dying. Nevertheless, Geoff Ryman is an optimist, and there is some hope in the book. Dorothy and Jonathan do find what they're looking for, though it is very different from how they'd imagined it. Geoff agrees:

"I think Dorothy has made an almost conscious decision to view the world in a certain way. Jonathan is far more ambiguous. What he escapes is the death he doesn't want to have, one way or another. Basically the option is open for you to believe that something genuinely magical has happened at the end of the book. If you want to read it that way you can."

Given the similarities between Ryman and the character Jonathan, a young gay Canadian actor living in Los Angeles, and his statement that the book includes a lot of personal experience, how much can be read into the book about the author? He once said that he didn't fear death:

"I was lying. Maybe. I go through phases where I don't. I think what I do fear more than anything is loss of identity. I think I probably dislike aging more than death. When you become aged and your identity per se has to go by the board and your very character has to change and adjust and lose power and lose expression and the very thing that distinguishes you, ie the things that make you different from other people are gradually lost, that is more scary than death."

With all these thoughtful concerns in his life, many affecting others more directly than himself, is Geoff Ryman politically active? He says not:

"Great shame and pity. I am very politically pained, particularly after the last general election. I was actually far more depressed after the 1987 election which was when I realised that there had been a demographic change and that I was now in a country where I was, if not in a minority, then where I could identify far less than when I first came here."

Despite this, Ryman says he doesn't feel Canadian either. It may be retrospective labelling but to me he seems to fit into that Canadian eccentricity that often invokes global concerns on an entirely intensely individual level: the music of Neil Young, Joni Mitchell, Leonard Cohen and Mary Margaret O'Hara; the films of Bruce MacDonald or Atom Egoyan; the novels of Michael Ondaatje or Margaret Atwood:

"It's always difficult to feel Canadian because the culture is still very much Scottish

the US. Nobody has really defined what feeling Canadian would be like.

We are getting there though. We all say it's the most boring country on Earth because that's how we remember it. Lately it's gotten quite interesting with Constitutional crises, rebellious Indians, and films like **Jesus of Montreal** (which is wonderful). It is interesting that in finding things to distinguish it, Canada is making more of its French heritage."

In **Was...** Ryman makes much of his own heritage having lived in small town Canada, the USA, and for the past few years, in London. His previous novel **The Child Garden** has been praised by lifelong Londoners as a book by someone who obviously knows and loves London. In **Was...** the reader spends most of the book in small town USA.

"I wrote the first draft in England. I actually broke off from writing **The Child Garden** in about September 1987, and by January 1988 I had the first draft completed. I knew then that this was going to be the watershed book, the one that would break through in America. It was a new way to get into the history of the West without even having to consider the stereotypes of the western with its gunfighters and its violence. I would be forced to deal with the domestic boredom and the isolation that life in the Old West actually consisted of. And the fact that it was amazingly nonviolent compared to modern society. One of the characters says in the book, Wichita, Kansas only had four murders in the whole of the 1870s when it was supposed to be the Wild West.

Dorothy came to me before Judy because I'd always been interested in the Old West, and in **The Wizard of Oz** and I thought I could find an intersection between the two. And in a sense **Was...** is a western, but a lot of the actual story came from a small village in Canada. The experiential material was already there, I just went back and got the street names right.

But you shouldn't ever write a novel you need to research first because it means you don't fully understand the feelings of the people. I picked Manhattan, Kansas, because it had a funny name and because it stood near two rivers and I thought 'I bet the railroad used to go through there'. Even before I went to San Diego and checked that it had indeed been on the Union Pacific Railroad.

I went to Manhattan, Kansas, just once, to research the past. I wanted to recreate a real town of the 1870s, and I think it's a reasonably good portrait. I could only ever afford to spend a week there, because I had to stay in hotels. I had to hire a car because *there ain't no public transport*, no train station any more. I went back to make sure.

The book originally had a completely different ending: Jonathan finds Oz in a different place, in Mexico. Ira can't take it and ditches him there, and decides to stay. It was an interesting ending but without any prompting from anybody I just realised it was



Artwork by Claire Willoughby

the wrong ending. The new ending was the product of what I had done researching Manhattan. One of the most exciting things I've done was when I decided I now knew where Dorothy had to live. My Dorothy was going to have to live in Zeandale because there's this string of Sunflower imagery, and there was a Sunflower School. I realised I now know where she lives, she has to live in the school district of the Sunflower School. How do I find it? So a lot of the events that happen to Jonathan trying to find Dorothy are the story of my search for my Dorothy.

The thing I couldn't properly research was the making of **The Wizard of Oz**. I went to the Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences. It was quite funny, they had very little of any historical worth, it was all old publicity materials. Only at the very end did they say 'Oh we do have the film's production file'. It was 5.30, they were closing and I had to come home the next day."

So **Was...** could have been very different. Knowing Geoff Ryman however, I suspect much would have remained as strong and clear.

We are joined now by John Clute, who is to dine with Geoff shortly, and who graciously waited while this interview took place. Geoff tells him that he has to keep talking until 'I say something interesting', but I assure John that I only have one last question. Frantically

searching the wreckage of my notes, while Geoff watches me patiently, I come across a bizarre note to ask Geoff: Would you describe yourself as a flirt? In the absence of anything more coherent, I offer this. Geoff laughs.

"No, I'm *deadly* serious. I keep telling people that no one has ever made a pass at me at a convention. One lives in hope. One sends up little rocket flares of desire. One has proposed somewhat obliquely. One has done all the fucking work. And one would always accept. So I say this at every convention in the hope that someone will."

I tell Geoff that I don't yet have a bed for the night.

"Ah, Kev, but I know you don't mean it, so now who's being the flirt...?"

So at least one scene in **Was...** is pure fiction, or pure fantasy. The rest may or may not be Fantasy, Western, or anything else, but **Was...** and its author, are a delight to encounter, be uplifted by, and deposited elsewhere. For half an hour the gales that blast Blackpool's seafront promise rather than threaten. By analysing escapism Ryman creates a new escape. **Was...** just might be what we want as well as what we need. Thank you Geoff Ryman.

TWO SHORT ARTICLES ABOUT

BIOPUNK

For those of us who so vividly remember the excitement that we felt at the collapse of the Berlin Wall and everything that followed, it perhaps comes as a bit of a shock to realise that it is now the best part of four years since the events which opened up the "other" half of Europe to Western visitors, and made direct contacts possible for most of us for the first time in forty years. Almost inevitably, the sense of discovery which accompanied the first great burst of contact is now slowly being replaced with a sense of business as usual. Despite the obvious economic and political differences which still exist between the countries of Eastern and Western Europe, nobody is much surprised by the fact the East is open any more, and the upheavals in Bosnia and the former Soviet Union make countries like the Czech Republic and Hungary seem almost Western in comparison, even if the economic pundits tell us they have quite a way to go.

Sitting here with the benefit of hindsight, it is interesting to look at the personalities and SF groups of Eastern Europe which made the greatest impression when we Westerners first came into contact with East European fandom (most of us in 1990 at The Hague). One of the most immediately magnetic figures from the Czech Republic (the former Czechoslovakia), certainly as far as the present writer is concerned, was Eva Hauser, with her tales of a radical new East European reply to cyberpunk called Biopunk, her phenomenal creativity, and her unique East European brand of feminism. In the summer of 1990, when we first met, the events of the "Velvet Revolution" were no more than a few months old, economic reform was still more talked about than practiced, and the first democratic elections had been held only a few weeks previously. In many ways, society had scarcely begun to change at all, and it was still abundantly clear to me, as a visitor from the West, that the old Czechoslovakia had been very different to the societies with which I was familiar.

Under such circumstances, it seemed entirely reasonable to suppose that the experience of forty years of totalitarian rule would continue to shape popular culture for some considerable time to come, and that it would take perhaps several years before the norms and cultural icons of the West would succeed in taking over from local icons of opposition to the old regime. Eva's biopunk, being formulated as a response to the totalitarian society whose presence was still so clearly visible, was a particularly interesting example. The way in which it analysed the internalisation of totalitarian behavioural norms by ordinary people under the old regime, the way it diagnosed their deformation by totalitarian psychology, and the way that it extrapolated from this process to a wildly grotesque vision of the totalitarian future, evoked powerful resonances.¹¹

In the summer of 1990, everyone in Czechoslovakia was fascinated by their new freedom to discuss what had happened to them in totalitarian times, and biopunk, it seemed, addressed itself precisely to this topic: its future seemed unlimited. What none of us at that time could possibly have suspected was the pace at which economic and political change would change people's priorities: the way in which the fascination with the totalitarian past would suddenly flip-flop into a fascination with cultural imports from the West, and the rapidity with which people would suddenly want to forget what they had been through. Science fiction in the Czech Republic is today perhaps more popular than ever, but the authors that people are reading are almost all Americans. Czech writers somehow lack the novelty of those with English bylines, and sales figures reflect this.

There is a certain irony, therefore, when one reads the confident assertion of Miroslav Fišer, in his article of spring 1991, that he had no fears for the future of biopunk, since the mood of the Czech reading public had already started changing even before his text saw print, and by the end of the year Fišer himself had more or less given up on SF fanzines for the sake of his involvement in local politics. Eva's own writing also began to change shortly after the revolution, and by the summer of 1991 she had more-or-less abandoned the grotesque allegory of biopunk for the more naturalistic (and more direct) approach which characterises her largely autobiographical time-travel novel, *Cvokyně* [The Madwoman], published in 1992. Today, Eva is perhaps becoming better-known as one of the very few authentic Czech feminists than as an SF writer, Fišer has dropped out of sight altogether, and Zdeněk Páv (the only other writer closely associated with biopunk)¹² has not published any new work for ages. There is a sense, then, in which biopunk is the afterimage of a artistic impulse which belongs to a completely different social paradigm, and looking back on it today, people are either unable or unwilling to relate to it.

Biopunk was nonetheless one of the most ingenious artistic responses I know to the last years of the totalitarian regime in Czechoslovakia, and captures perfectly the way in which SF writers throughout the 1980s used SF to construct metaphors for the situation in which they found themselves. Because it has never been properly documented in the English language, I thought it might be instructive to present two views of the whole phenomenon: one by Eva herself, a sort of retrospective manifesto, written in 1990, which tries to define her own aims when she thought of biopunk, and (for the sake of critical perspective) an independent assessment by Miroslav Fišer, written in 1991. Neither article has been amended to take into account social and cultural developments since they were written (indeed, Fišer's is perhaps the last article on biopunk which could seriously claim the

TRANSLATED AND INTRODUCED BY CYRIL SIMSA

movement had a future). They are perhaps most usefully regarded as a pair of snapshots, taken on the wing, from a society undergoing a very rapid process of social and political change. Neither should be taken as definitive.

One last point which perhaps requires clarification, before the reader continues to the texts themselves, is the precise relationship of biopunk to cyberpunk. This question arose when I started to circulate an earlier draft of the translations to editors in the West, one of whom in particular complained that the picture of cyberpunk which Eva presented was at best a caricature, and at worst a deliberate misrepresentation. There is, of course, a certain amount of truth in this, but at the same time I feel the complaint misses the point. One of the things which is so fascinating about biopunk as a concept is that, in Eastern Europe (still to some extent today, and certainly in 1988, when biopunk has its origins), people knew *absolutely nothing* about cyberpunk, and yet they were intensely interested in the phenomenon — or rather, what little they could glean about the phenomenon from inadequate source material, because information was very limited.

In the case of Czechoslovakia, it is possible to specify more or less exactly what information was available about cyberpunk in 1988, and thus the sources which Eva would have had at her disposal when she thought of biopunk: firstly, there was a Czech samizdat edition of 'Johnny Mnemonic', which would have been available to the hard-core SF reader, but not to the general public; secondly, there was a short fragment of *Neuromancer* (about the first two and half pages of the U.S. paperback edition), which was translated as an illustration in the official literary weekly, *Kmen*; thirdly, there was Ondřej Neff's lecture on the topic, delivered at Parcon 1987 to a packed audience of the most active SF fans, but never published;¹⁵ and that, essentially, was it. A few English-language specialists like Neff and Ivan Adamovič¹⁶ probably had paperback copies of some of Gibson's and Sterling's novels (either purchased on rare visits abroad, or sent by sympathetic Westerners), but generally British and American paperbacks were almost impossible to obtain, and most SF fans would not have had the relevant language skills to read them anyway. Thus, although it is true that Eva's article does not present a fair picture of cyberpunk as we knew it in the West, the image that emerges is actually a very fair representation of the way people regarded it in the East. This goes not only for people like Eva who used cyberpunk as a jumping-off point for something altogether different, but also for proponents of cyberpunk like Jiří W. Procházka who tried (and still tries) to write local variants of cyberpunk for the home market.

This fact has the interesting implication that perhaps the whole history of cyberpunk in Eastern Europe is based on a misunder-



standing. Not that this would be the first time that artistic development has occurred as a result of a misunderstanding: it is through precisely this kind of historical misunderstanding that many of the most interesting works of art have come to be created. (For example, I dare say Picasso knew absolutely nothing about the tribal context of the African masks he so admired, and any African who examined his interpretation of them would probably be horrified by his failure to perceive the precise nature of the rituals to which they so integrally belonged. Nevertheless, taken as paintings in their own right, his works made a crucial contribution to the growth of European modernism, without which the whole history of European painting would have been much the poorer). The same sort of argument can be applied to the East European misunderstanding of cyberpunk. Even though the local variants of cyberpunk often bear no more than a passing resemblance to the American original, the very attempt to come to terms with cyberpunk has greatly enriched the local literature.

Nowadays, of course, the Czechs are slowly catching up with all the material that was formerly denied them by political circumstances — Sterling has finally made it into Czech with some stories in the news-stand monthly *Ikarié*, *Neuromancer* has been published complete in book form, and Ivan Adamovič has published a number of critical essays about cyberpunk, based on original Western sources, which are much better informed than Neff's original lecture from 1987 — but in 1988, when Eva first thought of biopunk, none of this newer material was available, and all they had to go on was the two short translations from 1988 and the image of cyberpunk presented by Ondřej Neff.

These then, were the conditions which enabled biopunk to come to fruition in the twilight decade of totalitarianism in Czechoslovakia, and these are the reasons why I think the whole phenomenon may still repay attention. Now, perhaps, without further preamble, I should hand over to Eva Hauser and Miroslav Fišer.

[July 1993]

FOOTNOTES

1. Compare cyberpunk's extrapolation of the behavioural models presented by free-market Reaganomics into a vision of a world ruled by huge corporations.
2. Zdeněk Páv [b.1959]: prolific writer of unconventional, quirky, surreal short stories whose output has declined dramatically since the revolution.
3. Ondřej Neff [b.1945]: see the interview in *Foundation* 52, Summer 1991, 59-67.
4. Ivan Adamovič [b.1967]: important young writer, editor, critic and translator, perhaps best-known in the West as the foreign fiction editor of *Ikarié*, where he has worked since its inception. Winner of a "Karel" Award at Helicon for excellence in SF translation, and selected as an official East European delegate to ConFrancisco as part of their "Terry's Dream" scheme. He has also edited the selected works of H. P. Lovecraft for Czech publication and was a contributor to the revised edition of *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*, ed. John Clute/Peter Nicholls (1993).
5. Jiří W. Procházka [b.1959]: one of the main proponents of cyberpunk in the Czech language. His cyberpunk stories are collected in *Tvůrčí čas* [The Creators of Time/Praha: Winston Smith, 1991].



Artwork by
Slovak Illustrator Juraj Maxon,
from a comic strip
based on Eva Hauser's story
'Vykuklenci'

When we in Czechoslovakia first heard about American cyberpunk, and read the cyberpunk translations that began to circulate in samizdat, we were enthusiastic about its spontaneity, its power, the electrifying strength of its narrative style which casts the reader into the middle of a future world without anything much by way of explanation and guidance

Ondřej Neff, our best (and most active) SF writer during the second half of the 1980s, gave us a lecture about cyberpunk at our national SF con in 1987, which concluded: "Well, it's difficult to develop cyberpunk in a country, where one can't even find a working telephone box. Cyberpunk grows out of an atmosphere of highly developed technology, and a society that has absorbed this technology into itself."

I thought a lot about this, and said to myself: "But we are not just a backward country which is retarded in its technological development; no, the situation in our country has some specific traits and qualities, something which is worth describing, something which deserves to be expressed and studied and extrapolated." And as I am a biologist by training, it occurred to me that people in this system were not manipulated and co-created by technology, but perhaps by influences which were essentially biological.

The heroes of cyberpunk, in spite of all the novelty and colour of cyberpunk narrative, are at heart the same, familiar American boys — optimistic, active, greedy for money and longing for success. The heroes of biopunk, like the people that I saw each day around me, couldn't be nearly so straightforward.

When the disintegration and paralysis of society reaches a certain level, people lose their motivation to do anything at all. This is what we experienced in Czechoslovakia in the 1980s: people became extremely sceptical and passive as they realised, time and time again, that no matter what they tried, they couldn't bring about any results, that no revolt, no expression of anger was capable of changing anything, and that none of the results of their creative work were acknowledged or rewarded or used in practice. You could have a lot of money, but you couldn't do much with it; you could be outstanding in your field, but nobody would hear about you.

How challenging to analyse this deformed world! (And it was obvious that this was what I did anyway, even without biopunk. Biopunk was only a sort of label, an advertisement, for the stuff I was writing already, and which was disliked by some of our more conservative SF fans).

So what, in the biopunk universe, could take the place of cyberpunk's computer terminals, video displays and computer programmes? Two fields or possibilities were clearly visible:

Mutants, Genetic Diseases And Deformations, Chimaeric Organisms

(My original field was genetic engineering...). These old SF props had to be used with great precision, with a newly heightened inner tension and expressivity. The reader had to be put in the position of a manipulated creature with a deformed mind in deformed circumstances. (For example, the heroes of my stories often consider their situation to be marvellous and pleasant, even though by any rational analysis it is in actual fact frightening or utterly repulsive: this reflects totalitarian society with its grotesque voluntarism, its newspapers which continually declared that we, the people, were extremely happy, that we were living in a highly developed society, and that if we still had a few problems, they weren't really so serious...).

The problems of pollution and the environment were of course connected very closely with all this, with mutants and diseases, and this terrible voluntarism. The authorities kept secret the catastrophic state of our environment, did not allow people to be informed about the true state of the environment, or to predict trends: futurology itself was accused of being a "bourgeois pseudo-science", and the future could only be discussed in terms of linear growth. Manufacturing, the consumption of goods and energy, the level of the population, were all supposed to increase in relentlessly linear fashion — this is how the Communists imagined their planned economy and progress. Environmental problems were touched upon only very superficially, or vaguely: everybody spoke about the need to take better care of nature, to conserve energy and resources, etc. — but nobody could say or do anything concrete, point to the real culprit.

Our "official" SF treated this theme with terrible didactic schemata which were extremely generalised: extraterrestrials come to Earth and they see that people aren't able to solve their problems (warfare, the environment), and they say: "You ugly, stupid immoral people! Why-Are-You-Not-Better? We shall not enter into any contact with you!" This schema was really nauseating.

Biopunk sought to treat environmental problems without this terrible didacticism.

Ethological themes

In Czechoslovakia during the 1980s, there often appeared to be something bestial or feral in people's behaviour — manifested in a reluctance to help others, aggression, or apathy. The patterns and outer layers of civilised manners were washed away, and the

BIOPUNK

A NEW LITERARY MOVEMENT FOR POST-TOTALITARIAN REGIMES



BY EVA HAUSER



This photograph is from a set taken to accompany an interview in the Prague daily paper, **Lidové Noviny**

individual appeared "naked" and primitive, without any values or morals, ideals or ideas. People's values really degenerated into the pursuit of food, home-making and consumerism. Consumer goods from "the West" in particular represented a real goal to many people: blue jeans were a symbol not of nonconformism, but on the contrary of consumerism, and the same was true of cassettes, ghetto-blasters, walkmen, satellite dishes, video recorders... or just a T-shirt with a misspelled (badly imitated) English inscription, or a bottle of "Western" design in the bathroom.

People felt that "Westerners" were somehow better — that their behaviour was more friendly, that they had more self-confidence, more professional skills (and of course a higher standard of living) — but sometimes they also considered "Westerners" a bit naive. "Why do they talk so much? Why do they pose such ridiculous, funny questions? Ha,

ha, they can never understand what's happening here, what a real, harsh life is like." When they heard about feminism or animal rights or similar topics, they mocked them: "Oh, but they have really funny problems! They are too gentle, too civilised, almost somnambulist! They ought to live under socialism for a couple of years..." Yes, that would surely channel their minds to essential thoughts: food, the home, consumerism.

No wonder that biopunk had to be extravagant, shocking, aggressive. It had to focus on manipulated human beings, on the deformations of their psyche.

In my story, 'We, in Agony' (Agony is in fact the name of a country)²¹, I describe people who cooperate by sharing their inner organs, such as their kidneys or their liver. These people quarrel over whose turn it is to get the kidney on a particular day, and I found the scene quite funny, but it was unbearable for

some of the readers (which is ludicrous if you realise that they were living in strikingly similar conditions, they just didn't want to admit it to themselves).

People protect themselves from too much unpleasant information.

My heroine finds it really boring that her child is again and again in a state of clinical death, and is again and again brought back to life by doctors.

Sensitive readers feel uneasy when they read these scenes, but my children were ill extremely often when they were small, and I also found it boring not to sleep for several nights because of their rattling, and because of having to wait up to make sure they wouldn't suffocate. There is very little imagination in my stories, in fact. But there is also little traditional sentiment. Those readers who were horrified by my stories were probably just the kind of manipulated beings who preferred to spend their days in a queue for blue jeans or a tape recorder, rather than in trying to influence the environmental situation or to get some information about it — or at least to bother the administration a little, which it was perfectly possible to do.

My other stories are more experimental, playful, with motifs only loosely linked to one another. Again, mutants, inner organs, strange social structures, etc., predominate. In one story, for example, scientists discover that human beings are in fact larvae, and that after pupation (which can be induced under certain specific conditions), they hatch out into an imago. I describe this imago, recovered from human genes by scientists, and of course it is utterly repulsive.²² In another story, co-authored with Martin Křima²³, we focus on a society where the specialisation of people for their jobs is taken to an extreme. The hero is a man who has been specialised for destroying unnecessary old books, and he has only a big belly, a few tentacles, and a strong grinding device. He is proud of his high productivity at work... or perhaps he isn't, as his brain has been extremely simplified.

I have found several foreign authors who write pure biopunk. (Sometimes, when I am enthusiastic about a story I say to myself: "But that's it, that's it, exactly!"). Just one example: Octavia Butler's 'Bloodchild'. So, in fact, I don't mean my statement that biopunk is specific for post-totalitarian systems entirely seriously. Perhaps it's specific for handicapped layers of society, for societies which have something rotten at their core, for people whose living conditions are somewhat altered so that they are disadvantaged, repressed.

Among Czechoslovak authors, there are also a couple of other writers who have written biopunk²⁴. Usually they don't write it consciously, but they are pleased when I say to them that their story is a biopunk one. Of course, the incidence of biopunk stories in our country is high.

[1990]

"In the year 1922, the magazine Simplicissimus announced a competition for illustrators on the theme 'What Hitler really looks like'. The first prize went to a picture on which there were depicted a table with a jug of beer, a smoked sausage and a radish — the typical reality of a Munich cellar. Above the table is a black cloud, from which blaze flashes of lightning, and below the drawing is a notice: 'We have discovered that Adolf Hitler is not a person at all, but a state of mind.'"

Dušan Hamšík, *The Genius of the Mediocre*

Biopunk is also a state of mind. The state of mind of a Czech SF fan from July 1988. A state of mind incommunicable to anyone who didn't live in that time in our place. Biopunk is, after the robot, the second original contribution of Czech fantastic literature to the fantastic literature of the world, but I suspect that it will never be generally accepted, for elsewhere they lack the collective consciousness, the memories and the experience of reality, of which biopunk is the reflection.

In the first instance, biopunk is an antithesis of cyberpunk. An antithesis arising from the fact that, in our country which still finds itself in its electronic prehistory, cyberpunk is generally unacceptable, for we lack not only the material infrastructure, but above all the spiritual superstructure which comes from an understanding of the role and place of a person in a totally electronic environment. Ondřej Neff expressed it very aptly when he said that it is laughable to write cyberpunk in Czechoslovakia, when a person can't properly call by telephone from one end of Prague to the other. Reality has proved him right. Attempts at writing Czech cyberpunk are uniformly flabby dystopias about omniscient computer nets.

And here we have biopunk's second point of departure — the dystopia. I would make so bold as to say that everybody who has ever tried to write an SF story here in Czechoslovakia has written a dystopia. The dystopia was a natural reaction to all the things which the authors saw around them — disorder, corruption, bureaucracy, services that didn't work, a devastated environment, shortages, the widespread habit of people informing on their neighbours, indifference. It was an attempt to show just where the surrounding reality could lead in its consequences. At the same time it gave some small comfort that the situation was not as bad as the one described. This development towards the dystopia led to serious discussions in fandom about how, and even whether, to write optimistic SF. As an illustration I will introduce two opinions: "We write disgustingly because everything around us is disgusting, and to write that something is good would be to identify ourselves with that foulness and those lies." "To write optimistic SF at this time and in this country would be a perversion."

Another strong source of inspiration became the question of the environment. In this context it is worth noting that Eva Hauser commented already several years ago that she would like to write "eco-punk". In a society where nature conservation had become de facto an antistate activity, and a clear indication of dissent from the regime, the only thing at issue here was a further escalation in the expression of the overall frustration which was detailed in the previous paragraph.

Naturally, people's psychology was also affected by their surroundings, which manifested itself first and foremost in aggression and in complications between partners.

One should also take care not to neglect the influence of punk. The fascination with this phenomenon under Czechoslovak conditions should not surprise anyone: whether they rejected punk or sided with it, nobody could remain indifferent towards it. The regime's open persecution of punk, which spectacularly ignored its bureaucratic-communist "truths", under our conditions gave punk the seal of something exceptional and valuable.

These were the pillars of the purely human dimension of biopunk.

The cumulation of all the above-mentioned factors led to biopunk becoming a cry from the depths of the maltreated soul. A cry expressed through programmatic foulness, allegory and rebelliousness.

It would be a mistake to assume that since November 1989, biopunk has become redundant. Its points of departure either continue to exist, or at least live on and in the short term their removal is not readily foreseeable. On the other hand, we must acknowledge that (at least from the point of view of the Jihlava wing of biopunk's adherents) biopunk has not fulfilled the expectations which we had of it. (As an extenuating circumstance we might consider that the political changes which came were quicker than the internal development of the style). My objections relate to the following points:

(a) The biopunk environment should be completely different from the world which we know — never again a story in which, after 30,000 years, people still wear neck ties and smoke cigars!

(b) In the biopunk universe, the conflict between the sexes has been solved by the creation of a monosexual society and genetic manipulations, from which flows the need to deal with the problems which arise from such a solution.

If I deal with each of these points in turn:

(a) The fulfillment of this point in actual fact requires the creation of a working model of a new world, which is the most difficult task an SF writer ever meets. The ideal would be to evoke in the reader the sort of feeling which is evoked by the detective stories of James

A FEW NOTES ABOUT BIOPUNK

BY MIROSLAV
FIŠER

McClure, that is the creation of a logical system of relationships, the logic of which at first (or even to the very end) escapes the uninitiated reader, and which is wholly incomprehensible. It is important that the active characters of the work are driven by this logic. The comfort of the reader doesn't matter, or at least is secondary.

(b) On this point the theory has foundered all along the line. Instead of modelling a genetic patriarchy, a society of hermaphrodites, etc., biopunk is swarming with strong, capable, isolated women, who are surrounded by a drove of children and their good-for-nothing husbands. This is realism from a feminist point of view, and not SF! In this direction we still have a lot to remedy.

Just as biopunk arose from the inner conviction and compulsion that cyberpunk is in Czechoslovakia an exotic curiosity, I would suggest that biopunk will not take root anywhere else. It requires too specific a climate. However, while there are still inquisitive and intellectually inclined SF fans in Czechoslovakia, I have no fears for its future. [Spring 1991]

NOTES

6. The story was published in 1988, only after its title had been changed to the much less contentious 'Tomorrow in Agony', at the insistence of the censor.

7. A French version of this story has been published as 'Les Dechrysalides', tr. by Richard Podany in the Belgian fanzine *Magie Rouge*, no. 38-39, 1993. Contact: Suzanne Vanina, rue Marie Henriette 20, 1050 Bruxelles, Belgium.

8. Martin Klíma [b.1969]: Prague fan and gaming enthusiast, responsible in part for the Czech edition of *Dungeons & Dragons*.

9. Mostly notably Zdeněk Páv, see note 2 above.

10. Dušan Hamšík, *Génius průměrnosti: nová fakta a pohledy na Hitlerův konec* [The Genius of the Mediocre: new facts and perspectives on Hitler's end] (Praha, 1967). *Simplicissimus*: German satirical weekly published 1896-1944, and again 1954-1967.

11. Cf. Isaac Asimov's *Foundation Trilogy*, the first volume of which was published in Czech for the first time shortly before this article was written.

SOURCES

An earlier version of Eva Hauser's article was first published in Eva's English-language fanzine, *Wild Shaarkah*, no. 2, Dec. 1990. Revised version prepared by Cyril Simsa. Miroslav Fišer's article was first published in the Czech fanzine, *Qvark*, June 1991. Translated from the Czech by Cyril Simsa. A

Dutch version of both articles, prepared by Frank Beckers from the English text, was published in the Belgian (Flemish) fanzine *Cerberus*, 1992.

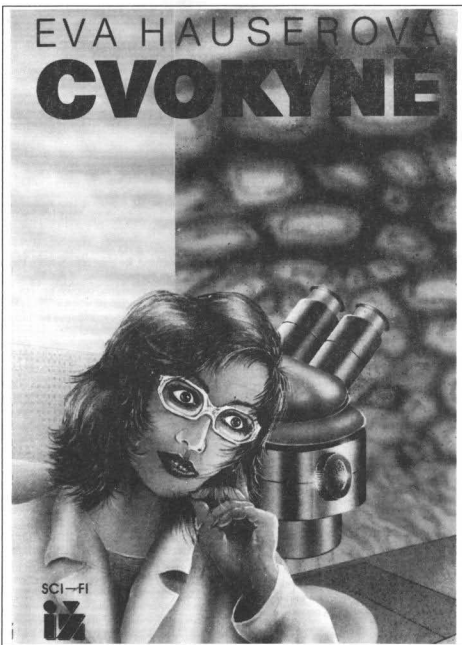
ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Eva Hauser [b.1954]. Originally a microbiologist by training, she has been writing short fiction ever since her mid-teens, and SF since the mid-1980s. Throughout the second half of the '80s she was a regular runner-up in the annual Karel Čapek Award short story competition, and in 1988 she won overall first prize for her story 'We, in Agony'. From 1990 to 1992, she worked as an editor of *Ikarie* magazine, the SF monthly founded by Ondřej Neff after the revolution, and she has also published two books, *Hostina mutagenů* [A Feast of Mutagens/Praha: Svoboda, 1992], which collects the best of her short stories, and *Cvokyně* [The Madwoman/Praha: Ivo Železný 1992], a time-paradox novel set against the background of a

research laboratory in Communist Czechoslovakia.

In English, her articles have appeared in a wide variety of genre and feminist publications, including *Shards of Babel*, *Vector*, *Yazyk* (Prague), *Women: a Cultural Review*, *Decolonising the Imagination* (ed. Carol Becker: Routledge, forthcoming) and *Everywoman*. One story has been published in *BBR* 21 (1992), and a second is forthcoming in the Czech-American feminist magazine *One Eye Open*.

Miroslav Fišer [b.1965]. Before the revolution, a prolific translator, critic and fanzine editor, based in the small Moravian town of Jihlava. His fanzine, *Mozek* (now defunct), was an enthusiastic proponent of biopunk, and was also notable for the amount of space it gave to Czech SF feminists like Eva Hauser and Carola Biedermann. Since 1991, he seems to have given up SF in favour of local politics.



Ursula Le Guin's

Earthsea Books

recommended
by Darroll
Pardoe

Compass
Points
7

When I was twelve years old I read *The Lord of the Rings* for the first time. It made a big impression. I'd never encountered epic fantasy on this scale before - a whole world laid out on the page before me in all its glorious complexity. In 1955, I think it was a pleasure that few people shared. As the fifties drew to a close and turned into the sixties, I re-read the trilogy quite a number of times. However, as I matured I began to realise that there was something seriously wrong. Oh, Tolkien has his strengths, and there are few who can equal him in painting in words the feel of a [place], in evoking a whole countryside for his readers' delight. But what bothered me was more fundamental. It was a mismatch between my own intuition of how the universe is constructed and his.

You may say, of course, that an author can construct their imaginary world to whatever specifications they like, and this is true. But it's no help to the reader who has to struggle with a story which feels just plain wrong. And Tolkien's world does feel wrong. It's a *Manichaeen* world, a battleground between forces of good and forces of evil, with the ordinary people squeezed between and suffering accordingly. Much of the time I found little to choose between the two sides. They treat those who get in their way with equal disdain. Why is Gandalf a Good Guy? He can be utterly ruthless in pursuit of his own ends, and heaven help anyone who gets in his way.

So, just as Ace were publishing their paperback edition of the trilogy, and the Tolkien cult was taking off, I was moving on. Not that there was anything else, much, for a while, and my reading turned in rather different directions. Until, a few years later, along came the first of Ursula LeGuin's *Earthsea* books. I read, and was hooked. Here at last was a world which was *right*.

I love the whole idea of an archipelago world, hundreds of islands surrounded by sea. It has (in my mind, at least), some of the flavour of the dark ages, when the Celtic saints used to travel about in their coracles, between Ireland, Scotland, Wales, Cornwall and Brittany, and encounter (if their *vitae* are to be believed) all manner of manner of strange creatures and happenings.

But there's more to *Earthsea* than this, deeper satisfaction to be had as one reads the stories. I can identify several strands. One of them is that the hero, Ged, is a full-fledged human being. He is complicated, both good and bad, light and dark. He uses his Art for the service of others, but is driven by his pride, which leads him into trouble again and again. And he has no certain answers. Like the rest of us, he muddles through and comes out on the other side, but with no clear idea of where he's going.

Another strand is that the *Earthsea* universe is explained in terms of balance, of

flowing and becoming, instead of the meaningless struggle of an arbitrary "good" and "evil". This seemed very satisfying to me right from the start, long before I was able to recognise it for a Taoist description of the way things are.

Clearly, LeGuin's fictional world, stripped of its magical trappings, has the flavour of reality about it, and this must surely flow from her own appreciation of the nature of things. A third strand is that the *Earthsea* stories deal in fundamentals: growth, maturity, life and death. And this gives them great power to address the reader on a very deep level.

Of course I have some reservations. More now, perhaps, than I did at first. The magical system of *Earthsea* is based on names. To know the name of the thing (or person) gives you power, control. This seems to me to make no sense at all. To be able to name a thing is not, in any real sense, to know that thing at all. (The old distinction between secular knowledge and wisdom). Of all the people in *Earthsea*, Ogion comes closest to being wise. He is free, living in the world but staying quite unattached to it, doing only what he must and when he must. Yet he too is a mage and must be supposed to operate the same system of name-magic as the others. This irritates me. The Master Doorkeeper is very wise also, but I strongly suspect him of being a dragon. Ged, I'm afraid, never does get the hang of it properly: he is always fighting against the accidents of his life, instead of accepting and building on them, which really does him no good at all. However, it makes him a rather endearing character.

Niggles aside (and what *did* happen to Thorion?) I have found the *Earthsea* series, both the original trilogy and the more recent *Tehanu*, one of the most satisfying tales I have ever read. Not only is it exceptionally well-told, well-paced and varied, but it opens windows in the mind, something which is very rare in modern fantasy. It has given me much pleasure over the years, and I hope will continue to do so.





First Impressions

Reviews of Hardback & Paperback Originals

Edited by Catie Cary

Rocket Rating

I'm introducing a new feature this issue — the Rocket Rating. Don't take it too seriously, it's intended to help guide busy readers to the best books, and should be interpreted as follows:

Essential.....
 Excellent.....
 A Good Read.....
 Worth Borrowing.....
 Why Bother?.....

Reviews

John Barnes

A Million Open Doors

Millennium, 1993, 314pp, £14.99 hb
 £8.99 tpb

Reviewed by Joseph Nicholas

Enc Frank Russell's *The Great Explosion* was the template for stories of stellar colonisation in which the speed of human expansion permitted the evolution of a diversity of cultures. Twenty years later, the premise was mined by Brian Stableford for his *Daedalus Recontact* series, in which Earth attempted to bring its colonies, by then inward-looking and unintelligible to it, back within the fold.

A *Million Open Doors* is virtually "*Daedalus Recontact Revisited*", as the springer, a method of instantaneous matter transmission, replaces the near-light-speed probe and brings the planets of human space back into meaningful contact with each other. The twist this time is economic: when a colony joins the network, and its smaller and less flexible market confronts the economies of scale enjoyed by those colonies already

reconnected, then production falls and unemployment and inflation rise.

The parallel with post-communist Eastern Europe is obvious and intended. To hammer it home, Barnes has the reconnected planet of Caledony operate on the principle of extreme rationality, in which not only are all planning and production decisions taken centrally but, so that right-wing libertarians can be swept into his net, money and profit are the only measure of social value. This should offer scope for a satire of both systems -- but instead Barnes retreats into a series of sub-plots in which the dour inhabitants of Caledony are taught the hedonistic values of the nearby culture of New Occitan, with much discussion of music and poetry which only demonstrates, yet again, that when it comes to High Art SF writers are best advised not to try imitating it.

The parallels are maintained when the Caledony government -- which gave a cautious welcome to the springer -- is overthrown by hardliners who want to choke off this opening to the decadent bougeois universe. Their repression prompts intervention by Earth's Human Council, quoting a thinly-disguised variant of the UN's Human Rights Charter (the UN is even referred to by name, although it's difficult to believe that, many thousands years from now, anyone but a historian would recall it so readily), and order is restored after a brief civil war. However, much of this takes place off-stage: at the crucial moment, Barnes sends his protagonist on a camping trip, where he discovers some alien ruins which subsequently engender an influx of archaeologists whose spending power helps Caledony overcome the post-reconnection slump.

As a climax to the plot, this is a cop-out; and as a solution to the economic problem,

wholly artificial — although it is consistent with the rest of the novel, whose scenario is not explored in any depth and so has a similar air of artificiality. Although Barnes's third novel, *A Million Open Doors* reads more like a first, the work of an author trying out ideas rather than getting properly to grips with them, and I wonder whether it might be a rewritten version of an earlier, unpublished manuscript. Even if not, it's still very disappointing.



Christopher Evans

Aztec Century

Gollancz, 1993, 352pp, £15.99

Reviewed by Ian Sales

Someone once said that a good SF story should change only one thing, and everything else builds on that. This is especially true of alternate history stories, although most are set at, or shortly after, the moment of change. In *Aztec Century*, the single change was Cortes' betrayal of Spain in the sixteenth century, but the novel itself is set 400 years later. In other words we have an alternate present dominated by a global Aztec empire.

Aztec Century is a first person narrative, written by Catherine, eldest daughter of King Stephen of the UK (although for some reason she is not first in line for the throne). The Aztecs have just invaded Britain, and conquered the country. However *Aztec Century* is not about the Brits fighting the invaders, but about them learning to live with their new masters.

The book opens with Catherine, her husband, sister, and entourage hiding in a Welsh valley from the Aztecs. They are soon



captured and returned to London. The Aztec governor does not want to dismantle the British administration but use it. Catherine is the only person opposed to this, yet she is powerless to prevent it. There are shades of WWII's collaboratorist governments in the way a group of seedy politicians rise to prominence under the Aztecs. Still, life pretty much returns to normal for the person in the street.

Since Catherine is committed to ending the Aztec rule, she becomes involved in plots to assassinate high-ranking Aztecs. Unfortunately, personalities get in the way, and she finds herself becoming attracted to Extepan, Aztec governor of the UK. The feeling is mutual, and Extepan asks her to marry him. She refuses; she can't do anything that would be seen to legitimise the Aztec rule.

However, she soon realises she is powerless, and accepts Extepan's offer and goes to see Motecuhzoma, father of Extepan and Aztec emperor at Tenochtitlan, the imperial capital. It is only when she discovers that she has been used from the beginning that she rebels and betrays Extepan, despite their love for each other. Indeed **Aztec Century** is a novel built around betrayal — from Cortes' change of allegiance to those perpetrated by most of the book's characters. It's not a happy book by any means, but then who said SF should be uplifting?

Evans may have built his world on a single historical change, but there are numerous allusions to real characters who are also subtly different. These allusions are cleverly and amusingly done. The Aztec-dominated world is cunningly designed (Although most of the Aztec names are real tongue-twisters), and their psychology informs their actions in a way that may writers don't have the skill to portray.

I admit I read **Aztec Century** in one sitting; I couldn't put it down. It doesn't have any "eyeball kicks" or Die Hard violence or real gosh-wow SF, but it is beautifully written. This is an excellent book — yes, I like it — I'd even nominate it for any 1993 SF award. Highly recommended.



Neil Gaiman & Stephen Jones (Eds) **Now We Are Sick**

DreamHaven Books, 93pp, £12.95
Reviewed by David V Barrett

The subtitle of this book is 'An Anthology of Nasty Verse', and it certainly lives up to it. Think of the sort of naughty poems you used to chant in the playground when you were sick, sorry, six. Poems with wicked words like "bum" in them, which had you shrieking with laughter (the one I recall, "Milk, milk, lemonade, round the corner chocolate's made" had a particular frisson of delicious dirtiness for six-year-olds). Now imagine horror writers like Kim Newman, Harry Adam Knight, Ramsey Campbell, Stephen Gallagher and Alan Moore (don't imagine too hard you

might want to use your imagination again one day). Now think of the *worst* thing that could possibly crawl out of the toilet bowl when the light's just gone out; you call for Mummy, but she doesn't hear you. Now, very carefully, stir all of these thoughts together (you might want someone to hold your hand while you're doing this).

Some of the poems in this volume are truly sick; many are lavatorial; a fair number are cannibalistic; a lot involve slime; and most of them are very funny — hardly surprising when the writers include Terry Pratchett, Diana Wynne Jones, John Grant and Colin Greenland. Much as I'd like to, it would be unfair to quote from any of the poems or to single out any as "better" than the rest; this depends too much on personal taste (or lack of it). I have a couple of criticisms; there are a few too many over-obvious pastiches (Lewis Carroll and AA Milne are so easy to do); and like many collections of verse it's far too short, with only 31 poems. Would I have bought it? At this price, no, though it would be a regretful decision; there should be a cheaper paperback edition.

Now We Are Sick is great fun, and would add a piquant element to the atmosphere of a late night drunken room party at a con; just make sure you have a large enough sick-bag to accommodate everybody — and a spoon to fish out the best bits.

Warning: Do not attempt to read this book without a six-year old, or a sick sense of humour present.



Colin Greenland **Harm's Way**

HarperCollins, 1993, 364pp, £8.99 tpb
Reviewed by Katie Cary

This is the story of Sophie Farthing, a "nobody's daughter", raised on High Haven, flying island and port of London in an alternative 19th Century. In this world, Sailing

Ships ply the aether wind between the planets and humans coexist with a number of alien races.

Sophie lives a hard life, toiling to support her morose, drunken, father; her only comforts her conversations with the alien watchman, Kappi (four feet tall and shaped like a bell), and the mysterious crystal ring which is said to have belonged to her unknown mother.

Eventually, Sophie's curiosity becomes too much for her; having ascertained that the metal-jawed Envoy Cox knew her mother, she stows away in an outward bound yacht to discover the secrets of her parentage.

Sophie's travels take her to a pastiche of Dickensian London, to the Moon and Mars, and eventually to Jupiter. She meets a panoply of larger than life characters; from Evadne Halshaw, "The Nightingale of the Spaceways", who travels the solar system in cluttered comfort in the company of an elderly but rakish fawn, to Beauregard Cnli, educated Martian Angel and ship's pilot "seven feet tall and twice that in span, wingtip to wingtip".

As she comes closer to discovering her origins, a talented member of the assassin's guild is sent after Sophie, pretty soon he is in a dilemma; torn between his professional pride and his growing attraction to his quarry. Of course Sophie wins through in the end, learning the full truth about herself and her beginnings.

Sophie is an attractive heroine, curiosity and resolution often causing her to act in a manner that would otherwise be unlikely in one of her reserved and restricted upbringing. Innocent and brave, but versed in the realities of life at the lowest strata of society, she carries more than an echo of Joan Aiken's popular cockney heroine Dido Twite.

Harm's Way marries scientific romance with the grittier visions of life for lower class Londoners to be found in the works of "realistic" nineteenth century writers, with a dash of Rider Haggard type adventure thrown in. It does this with zest and charm, conveying an infectious love for life and adventure. The story carries the reader forward with all the drive of a Saturday matinee serial, but you need not look for scientific justification; there is none. Rather, Greenland centres his attention on the life and learning curve of Sophrona Farthing. And I, for one, shall not complain.

Escapist? Oh yes... and why not? It will refresh the parts that other books fail to reach.



John Gribbin **Innervations**

ROC, 1993, 165pp, £4.99
Reviewed by L J Hurst

ROC do not give much away about the intended readership of their books, but this one is almost certainly a juvenile. Among other things it either supposes that the readers do not recognize how hackneyed the story is, or trusts to its occasional pieces of



irony to hide it.

Here we have a semi-feudal world inside what is quickly clear is a generation sarship. Two stories run parallel: Elyse is a troubled teenager who has a Talent which develops into telepathy, though she is rejected by her people, while the Navigator is sailing one of his lord's galleys around the world (on the inside). The Navigator has been joined by the Hawk, a skilled inventor who hopes to use twin Van der Graaf Generators as direction finders.

When the two parties meet they will climb the wall around the world and the computer which has been keeping track all the time though not intervening shows them their new home in the sun. This is all uninventive and weak on plot.

Running through the book rather strangely is its undercurrent of subversion: though it claims to be SF, Elyse's telepathy is magical, and the communication between the Generators is dubious too. Hawk explains it: "It has to do with what I call the law of similarities... The morphology is crucial... The construction must be perfect, but when it is, we have the effect you see. I call it morphic resonance." But we know that the law of similarities is a term used by anthropologists such as Sir James Frazer to explain magical thinking, whilst it was Rupert Sheldrake who coined the term morphic resonance, an idea derided in *New Scientist*. *Skeptical Enquirer* etc.

Maybe Gribbin wrote this with his tongue in his cheek. Its only a small element in a shortish book, I cannot decide what the reason is, though, and I'm not sure it will matter to any newcomer to SF who picks this up.

**Harry Harrison
& David Harris
Bill, the Galactic Hero: The
Final Incoherent Adventure!**
Gollancz, 1993, 215pp, £14.99
Reviewed by Norman Beswick

I'd lost count but there seem to have been six previous titles in this series, none of them anything like as funny as the first. Harry Harrison writes three kinds of story: major works like the *Eden* sequence and *Make Room! Make Room!*; adventure tales like *Deathworld*; and knockabout lampoons like this one. Presumably there are fans for each.

Bill (in case you didn't know) is a typical brainwashed trooper, seeking only a replacement foot and a quiet life with plenty of beer and nice women. On the front jacket he is pictured heaving upwards with bulging biceps what is either a time-bomb or a male prosthesis with a clock on it. He is sent by 'the eye-rolling religious General Weissearse' to help bomb the rebellious planet of Eyerrack into submission. Despite what its name sounds like, Eyerrack wickedly opposes war, believes in peace and has free elections; it is also (aha!) the only planet in the galaxy with a neutron mine. Now read on.

Bill's mishaps throw him to and fro across

the military divide in typically random fashion, and if you wanted you could follow them casually while watching the sport on television or knitting a patterned pullover. There are very few SF ideas, and apart from the appalling General the humour is slapstick and laboured. I normally enjoy satirical attacks on phoney religion and the military, but I closed this book thankful that apparently it is to be the last of its series. Is it too much to hope that Harry Harrison can now be persuaded to give us another of his more serious humdrums.

Martin Hocke The Lost Domain

HarperCollins, 1993, 383p, £15.99
Reviewed by Helen McNabb

The Lost Domain is another in the non connected series of anthropomorphised

animal sagas. *Watership Down* had rabbits, *Duncton Wood* had moles. **The Lost Domain** has owls. To be specific, it has Tawny owls. If you want to read the same saga from the point of view of Barn owls, then you don't want to read *this* book, you want to read the author's *previous* book called *The Ancient Solitary Reign*, which gets plugged at least once a chapter. I haven't read *The Ancient Solitary Reign*, but even though the protagonist in *The Lost Domain* keeps telling us how it differs from his account of the story I have no particular desire to read it.

I found this book irritating more than anything else. The style seems to be extremely affected, even pretentious, although I have to admit that the grasp of language and the range of vocabulary is better and wider than that of some books I have enjoyed much more. That may be because the ones I have enjoyed were aimed at children and the vocabulary is of necessity kept simpler,



whereas this is definitely not a book for a child.

There were a number of annoying factors such as the continual use of hindsight, for example "had I told him sooner things might have been different", which I presume is meant to raise tension, and used sparingly can well do so, but when used throughout the whole book, it merely dissolves any narrative tension the author might have succeeded in creating. If you know the end of the book at the beginning, there is nothing to keep you interested in the story. The narrative voice of Yoller, the protagonist, is inconsistent. At times he talks like an RAF chappie in a war time film, full of "old boy" type dialogue, but at other times talks quite normally, and there is no trace of the pompous ass in his descriptive passages. He uses "one" and "I" seemingly at random, starting a paragraph with "one" and swapping to "I" half way through, all of which gives no clear impression of Yoller's own voice. This is a serious flaw in a first person narrative because you need to believe in the protagonist even if you cannot empathise with him in order to maintain interest in his story.

The allegorical nature of the story is quite heavy, with "the great God bird", and quotations from poets attributed to owl poets. The messages of war between species bringing grief, and the need for peace and tolerance not being heard by the self-seekers in power, are rammed home with a sledgehammer in a way totally devoid of subtlety or sureness of touch.

As for the plot itself, it seems too light and too shallow to support one long book let alone two. It follows Yoller from youth as a hero fighting against the eagle owl, through war with the Barn Owls and Little Owls to his eventual death. It could have had excitement in different hands perhaps, but the tone, the pace and the voices in this book are too flat and uniform to instill any thrills or create any tension.

All in all it is a book which I found dull and boring and I can't honestly find enough redeeming features to recommend it to anyone. Not even for a long train journey

William James
The Other Side of Heaven
Orbit, 1993 543pp, £5.99
 Reviewed by Lynne Bispham

The second volume of **The Sunfall Trilogy**, this novel is an undemanding yet entertaining light read. The action takes place thousands of years in the future during the era of the Third Empire. The reader gathers that the first volume of the trilogy, **The Earth is the Lord's** related how Sergei Rostov and his son Alexei, subjects of the high-tech, space-faring Empire, came to be marooned on a low-tech planet, Tarvaras, amongst the Yek who consider that the only True People are those who have talons. When this volume opens, Sergei, now known as Suragai, and Alexei have risen to positions of importance in Yek society, with

Suragai having adjusted to their situation on an alien world rather better than Alexei.

The Yek nobility, the Khans, when they are not conquering other peoples, spend their time jostling for political power, paying lip-service to the Yasa, their code of honour. The book reverberates with conspiracies and attempted assassinations as Burun, head of the Merkut clan, manipulates those around him to ensure that the candidate of his choice will sit on the Dragon Throne as Kha-Khan. The second half of the book concerns the embassy undertaken by Alexei and Burun's grandson to the unknown lands on the other side of the world — a sea voyage which results in unexpected discoveries and revelations about Tarvaras and the Yek.

There are aspects about this book which irritate — for example, the over-use of the apostrophe in "alien" words such as "k'miss" and "st'lyan" became distracting and characters are described as having an amused expression rather too often. The novel is not recommended for ardent feminists, for Tarvaras is definitely a man's world, and the status of women in Yek culture does not give the author much scope for the depiction of strong female characters. The independence of Alexei's wife is considered exceptional, and the Yek take a dim view of "women's rights".

However, as an SF-adventure-yarn, **The Other Side of Heaven** succeeds admirably. Attacks by mutant, flights from assassins, a savage duel and the complexities of Burun's intrigues within intrigues keep the pages turning, while the Yek themselves and their world are well realised. This reviewer will be looking for the third book of the trilogy.

Phil James
The Galaxy Game
Millennium, 1993, 212pp, £7.99 (pb)
 Reviewed by Valerie Housden

Humans and other life forms do not act out of free will. All our actions are governed by superintents who use us as pieces in the Game. The Champion has chosen Richard ("Don't call me Dick!") Curtis to lead his team on board the ship *The Pioneer* to the star Alcyone and back, a trip that would take four weeks subjective time for the crew, but owing to time dilation lasts eight hundred years for the people of Earth. During this time, of course, technology advances so that humanity gets there first.

Clumsy Richard's crew consists of: big, fat Bill Bowman who just wants to get away from his awful wife; Wilverton the boring bookworm who is convinced that the crew are living in a story; Thompson whose function is to be killed on cue; Carlton the sexy pilot who becomes as blind as a bat when he loses his contact lenses; gormless Gloria the gorgeous stowaway, and finally, Arnold the erratically deaf shipboard computer, built in the likeness of Richard's father, who must have had more to him than a head and an arm. Additional characters include the evil genius Vyland, his

twin brother Mycroft and Vanessa who blames a man who left Earth two hundred years before she was born for her failed love life.

All very silly and aimed at exploiting the current vogue for humorous SF-type novels. That this is aimed at the widest possible audience is shown by references to standard works, such as Tolkien, John Wyndham, C S Lewis and a television serial featuring an alien with pointy ears, despite the obvious opportunity there are no cyberjokes, nor any jokes at the expense of any other developments in SF or fantasy in the last thirty years.

Funny writers such as Terry Pratchett or Douglas Adams let the humour arise out of real people in an ordinary situation viewed from a slightly odd angle or taken to an extreme. James' situations are ridiculous to start off with, and as already indicated, his characters are clichéd stereotypes. He therefore has to rely very heavily on one-liners for his jokes, which to be fair, he manages to sustain to the end of this first book. Will he last till the end of the trilogy? Yes, this is the first in a series.

This book was not as bad as I thought it would be. It raised a smile on occasion, but it also made me squirm rather a lot. The blurb on the front does us all a favour when it warns: "Straight out of the Idiots-in-Space tradition". I would not spend good money on this book.

Katherine Kerr
A Time of War:
Days of Blood and Fire
HarperCollins, 1993, 395pp, £15.99
 Reviewed by Catie Cary

This is the latest instalment in Kerr's huge and bestselling Deverry series. For those unfamiliar with these novels, I should explain that they are set in a well-realised alternative Celtic world, where a tribe of Gauls has migrated to a plane of existence where magic (dweomer) is possible and where they coexist with legendary creatures such as elves and dragons. Kerr is one of the best writers in this field, combining wit and imagination with a powerful rendition which does not shrink from the less attractive aspects of Celtic cultures. An important feature of the series has been the use of reincarnation as a device to follow the careers of a group of characters through a succession of bodies, working out the consequences of actions in past lives as they develop. This has resulted in rich complex plotting, which may at times cause difficulty for the reader who has not begun at the beginning.

A Time of War is the seventh book in the sequence following on from an appalling cliffhanger at the end of **A Time of Omens**. And still Kerr teases the reader, since the first 100 odd pages of this novel follow a new character, Jahdo, a rat-catcher's son, selected by Meer, blind bard of the Gel da'Thaad to be his guide as he searches for news of his lost brother, in the lands to the

east that border those of the dread Slavers. Kerr has a great deal of skill as a storyteller and the pages fly past. Adventure, romance, wonder... Kerr weaves all these threads into a story tinged with sorcery and betrayal. She evokes the full range of emotions; her characters are rounded people, for good and ill, acting as they will for their own inner reasons.

And still the story is not fully told. It takes stamina to follow a tale told at this length, yet beginners are indeed advised to begin at the beginning with **Daggerspell**. Those of us who have followed the story from the start, may now be a little impatient to reach the conclusion. One thing is certain though: from a writer of Katherine Kerr's talent, it will be worth waiting for.



Tanith Lee Elephantasm

Headline, 1993, 310pp, £19.99
Reviewed by Sue Thomason

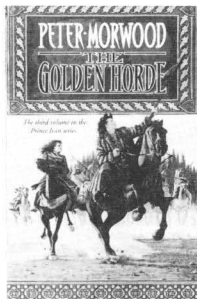
This book is primarily an evocation of the Myth of India, the British Colonial India in which tigers roam the jungle, exotic but civilised rajas command untold wealth, villagers worship idols, and bluff English soldiers are debilitated and corrupted by malaria, curry, and congress with native women. The plot is a kind of decadent fairy-tale cum Victorian melodrama in which poor, pure Annie Ember leaves the city slum for service in the household of Sir Hampton Smolte, the Smolte's lives are ruled by India. Their mansion is a compendium of Mughal architecture, with attitudes of Hindu deities dotted about the grounds. They love and hate the Indian culture that has shaped them, that they can never escape from.

Annie soon learns that the "service" required of her is neither drudgery in the kitchens nor the fine sewing she is skilled at, but the sado-masochistic sexual servicing of Sir Hampton's son Rupert. She survives, and plots not revenge, but how to keep on surviving.

But Annie is protected from the worst of Rupert's cruelties by an ivory charm in the shape of an elephant, which she bought for a penny in a mysterious curiosity shop. As the story unfolds, it becomes apparent that Annie is the unwitting instrument of a supernatural revenge directed at the Smolte family by Ganesha, the elephant-headed god, the elephant symbolises and embodies India, and the elephant's revenge is directed not merely at Sir Hampton, who won his mysterious wealth by despoiling a temple of Ganesha, raping one of the God's devotees and engineering a massacre of outraged villagers, but at the entire Smolte family and their associates. They are the colonial English; the rapists of India, arrogant and ignorant despoilers and destabilisers of a rich and intricate culture and heritage that they do not care to comprehend.

Although the story is eminently readable, **Elephantasm's** great strength is in its

atmosphere. A rich and detailed array of images, symbols, and sensory stimuli create a mood, a feeling, a true evocation of an imaginary, archetypal India, the India in which rakshas, demons, inhabit the untameable luxuriance of the rukh; in which a boy may be raised by wolves, in which gems beyond price litter the ground before the feet of four-armed images in deserted forest temples. It works not on the intellect, but on that part of the mind that dreams, blending colour and scent and strong emotion and memory into a seducing, intoxicating distillate. Try it. You may like it.



Peter Morwood The Golden Horde

Legend, 1993, 312pp, £8.99
Reviewed by Barbara Davies

This is the final volume of the Prince Ivan series, the sequel to **Firebird**

It is 13th century Russia, and the Tatars of Batu Khan, descendant of Chinghis Khan, are sweeping across Europe, conquering everything in their path. The Khan's method is simple, submit or his Tatar army (the golden horde of the title) will slaughter your people and raze your city.

In the Kingdom of Khorlov, Prince Ivan Khorlovskiy has been made Tsar. Used to dealing with minor Russian disputes, and repelling Tatar raiding parties, he has seen nothing like this massive invasion before. Watching the other Tsars defy the Khan and be obliterated, he realises he must submit.

However, in order to continue as ruler of Khorlov, Ivan must travel with his sorceress wife, Mar'ya Morevna, and their two children, to the city of Sarai, there to prove his subservience to the Tatar gods and the Khan himself. And he must forfeit the ancient crown of Khorlov. And therein lies the snag. The Russian crowns contain powerful magic, and so when gathered together, may rip open the fabric of the world and allow darker powers to come through. And Mar'ya fears that Ivan's

crown may be the one to tip the balance

Morwood tells a riproaring tale, full of the authentic whiff of 13th century Russia (and I do mean whiff -- at one point, Ivan's son accurately refers to the Khan as 'Old Stinkyfeet!'). There is plenty to get your teeth into: political intrigue, the clash of two cultures, magical horse, and a shape changing wolf. And throughout, we follow the attractive and convincing character of Ivan himself, a young and relatively inexperienced Tsar, with a wife who to his irritation often knows more than he does, and children that aren't as respectful as they might be. Then there is the family friend, Volk Volkovich, the huge wolf that can change into a man, who will insist on telling Ivan the home truths he'd rather not hear, and who seems to be more popular with his own children than he is. It's hard work being a husband, and a father, and a Tsar trying to keep his subject from acting foolishly and to stay one step ahead of the bloodthirsty Khan and his followers. Great stuff.

I hadn't come across the series before, but I intend to remedy that omission as soon as possible. Recommended.



Paul Park Coelestis

HarperCollins, 1993, 254pp, £14.99
Reviewed by L J Hurst

This is a book about the damage done at the end of empire; imperialism being responsible indirectly for most problems. It is a book about the experience of the alien, and about attempts by the authorities to bring their "civilisation" to a colony. Yet, though it is set on a planet at the far end of the galaxy, cut off by the breakdown of the empire, it is also about the Earth. Unhappily, ironically, what has been developing in this summer of 1993 in Somalia, Paul Park has described in **Coelestis**.

A distant planet is celebrating the Fourth of July holiday: it has two native sentient species, one almost exterminated and totally alien, the Demons, the other almost humanoid with many accepting humanity to the point of major plastic surgery, adoption of Roman Catholicism and learning the music of Beethoven. Some of these humanoids, though, are rebelling.

A very English consul is at a party when he and Katherine (a native made beautifully human) are kidnapped in a rebel raid. Without her medicines she begins to fall apart and to doubt the value of mimicking human shape. In moments of despair she tears out her plastic fingernails and taeardcuts, and starts to cut her body with shears.

As the consul and Katherine escape and journey back to their friends, they discover how alien the aliens are, and even more isolate is the last demon. The optimism of the last few pages is out of keeping with the rest of the last half of the book.

This is not a planet that I have visited before but it is a familiar world because it is

based on this one, and other writers have made gestures towards it (Walter Tevis in **The Man Who Fell To Earth**, for instance). This is howempire ends with minor British consuls in dry, distant parts taking drinks with the last friendly anglicised natives, while the rebels in the hills have taken that bastard form too (and now try to cast it off).

Without her guards Katherine struggles painfully with the body the surgeons have given her. However, that is not something that is in the future: it is happening now. Harriet Cirru, the rebel leader who is allowing her human face to fall apart, could be compared to the schizophrenics who refuse to take medication on political grounds, while the extent to which medication is necessary in Katherine's bodyshaping is also the case today. Radio Four has broadcast a discussion of potential face transplants for the badly burned: the problem is not with the surgery, it is with the amount of immunosuppressant drugs the patient must take: levels which would make kidney failure and cancer almost certain. Paul Park thinks things are not going to change much.

An alternative reading is that he has not written speculative fiction, but an allegory of today. The effect, though, is not to make problems clearer or more easily identifiable, but to distance them and make them slightly more blurred. In particular, I could not see the significance of having an American planet so interested in English life. Is Paul Park, who lives in New York, aware of the implications of the alien in this sentence in chapter three: "There were very few Christians left in Golders Green, in London"? If he is, there must be deeper levels than I have realised in the book.



Terry Pratchett **Johnny and the Dead** *Doubleday, 1993, 172pp, £9.99* Reviewed by Martyn Taylor

Johnny is Johnny Maxwell, the pint sized Everyman we met in **Only You Can Save Mankind**, and the Dead are... well, the Dead. Not Jerry Garcia and the boys but the Dead, as in dead people, who live in Blackbury Cemetery, which has just been sold to United Amalgamated Consolidated Holdings for 5p. United Amalgamated are going to develop the cemetery, for the future! Which doesn't strike the Dead as a particularly good idea, as they are going to be turfed out with not even a compulsory purchase payment in return. As Johnny is the only one who can see and talk to them — with the possible exception of old Mrs Tachyon, the bag lady who has even less chance of getting the ear of those in authority than Johnny — he is chosen to *do something about it*.

To tell you what he does would be to spoil a marvellous story. To even begin to describe the amazing characters who inhabit this short novel would occupy more space than I have available. To choose a sample joke would have me scratching my head for hours.

You think this is a good book? Right. It is funny, poignant, angry, outrageous and moving. Were it a movie, you'd leave the cinema wondering whether you were crying with laughter or because of the passion and compassion of the story.

Passion? Compassion? But this is a Pratchett. It's a funny book. You don't have those qualities in comedies.

Yes you do. You have them in this book, in my opinion the best he has ever written, one that would shift him — were there any justice — from the ranksof "mere" bestsellerdom into the realm of "literature". (One of the judges in the 1993 Guardian prize wondered whether **Only You Can Save Mankind** was literature. Anyone who asks the question about **Johnny and the Dead** isn't capable of understanding the answer.) As someone who reads a lot of children's literature (to my kids) I say that Terry Pratchett is simply the best there is, and wonderfully untainted by the brush of crude political correctness because of the very obvious love, understanding and compassion he has for all his characters, even the "baddies".

Yes, but it's a kids' book. Think that if you like, but you'll be missing a good story achingly well written, filled with characters who step off the page and live with you. It also makes you look again at the way we live today. You don't want any of that? You want escapism? It's your loss.

To conclude this panegyric, I'll quote my nine year old's reaction. He said "It's the business!" He's right.



Mickey Zucker Reichert **The Western Wizard** *Millennium, 1993, 501pp, £14.99* Reviewed by Barbara Davies

The Last of the Renshai ended with the death of one of its protagonists, Rache Kallmirsson, and the realisation that the last of the Renshai was not Rache but Colbey Calstinsson, master swordsman. We were also told that the Western Wizard (one of 4 Cardinal Wizards tasked by Odin with keeping the world in balance) was dead.

The Western Wizard is the sequel; so here we are again, in a land of blood-thirsty warriors and Norse mythology, but this time concentrating on Colbey and his efforts to restore the Renshai race. It doesn't look promising — Colbey is sterile, and the only other surviving Renshai are a woman and two boys. And Colbey's a bit thick when it comes to handling people — though he can read their minds, he is terrible at empathy and emotion — which has dreadful consequences.

And surprise, surprise, Colbey is not after all the last of his race, but is actually the new Western Wizard. Not that this is much to write home about — of the other wizards, Carophan blew it in the last book, and this time, Trilless and Shadimar keep getting it wrong, misinterpreting the prophecies, thinking the good guys are bad and getting

into a terrible mess. (I like Shadimar's pet wolf, Secodon — he's cute!)

The plot is thin, as though this book — the middle of a trilogy? — is merely a delaying tactic until the final volume, there are moments of interest — when Garn, the ex-gladiator, helps Sterrane to become king, and when Colbey is attacked by a flying demon — but for the most part I felt I'd been here before, albeit with different protagonists. It's disconcerting that the character we were previously encouraged to empathise with — Mitrian, the female Renshai — is for the most part passed over. And Reichert picks up and drops her players (sometimes even killing them) on what seems to be a whim, skips over ten years in a couple of paragraphs, and introduces characters from nowhere whenever she gets stuck in a dead end. She seems to be making it up as she goes along.

There is an interesting plot thread waiting to be developed — in order to become a proper wizard, Colbey will have to undertake the Seven Tasks of Wizardry — but that thread is delayed until the next volume. Instead **The Western Wizard** meanders erratically from battle to battle, giving us 90% sword and only 10% sorcery. I began to wonder how much more I could take of Colbey teaching sword play and Renshai honour to his proteges, and fighting and overcoming both his enemies and fearful wounds.

Verdict. If you like sword play, then read **The Western Wizard**. Otherwise, wait for the inevitable sequel.



Lucius Shepard **The Golden**

Millennium, 1993, 216pp, £14.99
Reviewed by Catie Cary

We begin in a weird castle in Eastern Europe on October 16, 188-, where members of a large and influential Family are gathered for a special ceremony; they will decant a special vintage, the Golden. It comes to our attention that this is a Family of vampires and that the liquor that will be supped is held within the body of a young and innocent girl. We are on familiar territory here.

The story is told from the viewpoint of Michel Beheim, a beginner vampire and ex-policeman. When in the midst of political intrigue, the Golden is brutally murdered, we are not surprised when he is asked to take up the case. He is assisted by a number of women, including his mortal servant and bedwarmer, Giselle, a wanna-be vampire and Alexandra, who's been a vampire for quite a while and is tall, classy and thin. The narrative is cluttered with breathless sex and unnecessary violence. So far so good, we will speak no more of the plot.

We could talk about women's bodies. Shepard does, and for those of us who don't really care whether her breasts are cupped in lace or nestled in chiffon, this can become a mite tedious. However, from the blandness of

such physical descriptions he does occasionally ascend to the truly bizarre; "the long thighs delicately flexing, stems supporting the bloom of her belly".

Turn aside your eyes from the silliness of the plot and the vivid descriptions of the female characters. Forget the occasional clunching anachronisms. Shepard builds awesome arching structures of metaphor and simile, and writes in a rich congested language wholly appropriate to a Victorian vampire pastiche. This novel is rank with sex, blood and decay, rife with exotic dream imagery, and infused with a sense of doom. I read it at a sitting, alternating gusts of laughter with gasps of appreciation.

Highly entertaining.



Peter Straub The Throat

Harper Collins, 1993, 689pp, £15.99
Reviewed by Jon Wallace

The Throat returns to the story, begun in *Koko* and continued in *Mystery*, of Tim Underhill's search for the truth behind a series of murders — the Blue Rose murders — in his home town of Millhaven. When the wife of one of Underhill's old friends is found badly beaten and stabbed, with the words "Blue Rose" scrawled on a wall near her body, Underhill has to face the unpleasant idea that the forty-year old murders aren't over yet.

The Throat follows Underhill and his friend, John Ransom, as they range from their school days in Millhaven, through their few encounters in Vietnam, to modern day Millhaven. Peter Straub has populated his novel with a range of personalities, Michael Hogan and Paul Fontaine, the policemen, Alan Bruckner, John Ransom's father-in-law, Tom Pasmore, the private detective, Glenroy Breakstone, the jazz saxophonist, and friend of one of the original Blue Rose victims and John Ransom and Tim Underhill themselves. Each one holding a piece of the answer, and each one having his part to play in the puzzle's eventual solution.

Peter Straub is a literate, confident writer. he writes with a cool distance which seems to set the reader above the protagonists to observe the incidents, while at the same time

revealing the twists and turns to us as they occur to the characters. The combination is a satisfying mix; there is never the feeling that they know something we don't. We are led smoothly along, following the line of the plot.

The development of Tim Underhill's personality mirrors this technique, he seems cool and distant, an observer, but as the story unfolds it becomes obvious that this is a screen over the deeper feelings that drive and confuse him. The death of his sister, April, which prefigures the death of Ransom's wife, April, Underhill's childhood experiences and the "childhood" that he and Ransom construct for the murderer; the Vietnam experiences which run like a thread through the whole novel, and the novel that Underhill is writing, which has disturbing resonances of the events which are unfolding around him. All of these things combine in Underhill to lead him towards the climax of the novel.

Reading this book, you become immersed in the world of Millhaven, its streets and its people. Underhill leads us through the haunts of his childhood, through the dark places where bodies have been found and is helped in his struggle to understand and come to terms with the events unfolding around him by the people that he meets.

The Throat is a deep, satisfying novel rich with character, the writing showing the style that we have come to expect from Peter Straub. It is a powerful and personal book from a master of the genre.



Bridget Wood Rebel Angel

Headline, 1993, 441pp £16.99
Reviewed by Cherith Baldry

This book follows the pattern of Bridget Wood's previous fantasies, *Wolfking* and *The Lost Prince*, in which human beings from Earth's future find themselves translated into the legendary Ireland of the past, and their lives interwoven with its history. However this is not a trilogy; it's possible to read any of these books independently.

The Rebel Angel, Fael-Inis is an eternal being who turned away from the battle between God and Lucifer, refusing to take sides. Bridget Wood presents him as an

ambiguous creature, aligned neither with good nor evil, but because of the fascination she builds into his character, and because of how he contrasts with genuinely evil creatures of the novel, the reader is bound to think of Fael-Inis as good, although he is considerably more interesting than good is often depicted as being.

Early in the novel, Fael-Inis is encountered by four humans who have escaped from the planet Renascia, a world colonised by the now destroyed Earth, and destined itself to be destroyed by being sucked into a black hole. I find the picture of Renascia society less successful than the future societies of Earth described in the two previous books. Renascia is far too cosy and domestic, and most readers will not regret its disappearance; nor, for all their concerned noises, do the Renascians who escape.

Once the novel gets going in the legendary Irish setting, it becomes much more convincing, as Bridget Wood tells the sort of story she is very good at. In this later period the Beastlines are weakened and only six of the twelve original royal houses survive. The High King of Tara, the Wolfking, has been killed, his heir imprisoned by a sorcerer in Dark Ireland, and the rest of his court driven out of Tara by the Giants of Gruagach. The only survivor of the Wolf/Human line is Nuada, a bastard and an outcast. The impact of the Renascians cause Nuada gradually to accept his destiny, and restore the Wolfline to Tara. At the final crisis, it seems as though Fael-Inis will sweep down in his chariot and put everything right; this he refuses to do, forcing Nuada to use his inherited powers or be destroyed along with all he cares for.

The style — the combination of heightened description, horror, and humour — will be familiar to Bridget Wood's readers. The magic of the twilight forests is as potent as ever. Though there are some gruesome episodes, the book escapes the sometimes overwrought nastiness of *Wolfking*. The humour, particularly the descriptions of the unspeakable habits of giants, can become irritating, though there are some genuinely funny moments.



BARBED WIRE Kisses

Edited by
Maureen Speller

With so many magazines appearing monthly (though nominally so in *Pulphouse's* case, at present) demands on material are high. Is there enough good quality material to go round? To judge from the latest batch of stories, no. Either that or the summer silly season is affecting them as well. Of course, it may be that my expectations of these magazines are way too high. For most people they are an amusing diversion rather than the raw material of an ongoing examination of the condition of science fiction, in which case, do I have the right to set such high critical standards and then dismiss the bulk of the stories out of hand? I believe I do. I'm as much a consumer as the next person, I also read for entertainment and I'm entertained by stories with substance, innovative ideas. Too often, it seems that I'm being served warmed-up leftovers.

Take, for example, G David Nordley's 'In the Miranda Rift' (*Analogue*, July), a story of four space explorers trapped in the satellite's interior, trying to find a way back to the surface. Sound familiar? Jules Verne has been there before, and all without leaving Terra Firma. Nordley candidly acknowledges his sources but can you tell me why we need a retread of what was a perfectly serviceable story in the first place

I'd like to say that Nordley presents a sharply observed psychological profile of four people in close confinement but he opts for the sense of wonder and lovingly describes the geological wonders his party observes while totally failing to make his characters remotely believable.

And what about Michael Armstrong's 'Catch the Wotan!' (*F&SF* July)? A man is thrown from a spaceship yet manages to survive by using his head, so to speak. It's the latest in a long line of 'against the odds' stories, the most

recent I can think of being Geoffrey A Landis's 'A Walk in the Sun'. So his heroine walks around the moon, this chap manages to slingshot himself round an asteroid. You can sit back and admire the neat scientific resolution but that's about all. Even more irritating is Kent Patterson's 'Defend With The Utmost Endeavour' (*Analogue*, July). An unorthodox weapon is needed in a hurry and the otherwise maligned history professor who's shipped out on a cheap passage to Mars, works out a few neat moves with some flex rods and a piece of string. This is so typical of *Analogue's* 'we can do this' attitude, I'm only surprised I hadn't seen an example sooner. To be fair, it's a neat little story but half a dozen of these at one go becomes ever more exasperating.

Detective stories are another surefire winner when it comes to casting around for a 'new' idea. I suppose it is in the problem-solving

nature of the SF beast that writers will quickly spot the potential in sending in an investigator, a detective even. Indeed, certain authors, like Kate Wilhelm, are as respected in the mystery genre as in SF. However, the mistake that too many writers make is in assuming that writing SF detective stories is easy. You just mix some SF and a mystery, right? Paul Ash's 'The Man Who Stayed Behind' (*Analogue*, July) is a prime example of just what can go wrong with such an approach. He has an SF mystery, a missing planet; he has a suspicious off-duty cop, peeved at being taken off a case in favour of a smart-ass outsider with whom he's worked once before. The next thing you know he has met a telepath, uncovered a mystery and is being recruited to solve the original mystery as well. In more competent hands, the various strands of the story could have been neatly woven together, incidentally exploring the effects of space travel on a society — Ash sets up, but entirely fails to exploit, the predicament of a society where people are expected to get into space. Instead he adopts the crude, building-block approach. We see each of the series of incidents in chronological order and then everything is explained tidily at the end, over coffee and cake.

Charles de Lint's 'Paperjack' (*F&SF* July) is pretty much what you'd expect from de Lint. His musician-protagonist is moping because someone from a previous time stole his lady love and he wants to find out what happened to her. This he proceeds to do by coincidence and much rooting around in a library, in between providing an exhaustive description of his busking playlist. de Lint drives me to distraction with both his inability to flesh out his plots and his insistence on laying out his credentials as a musician and folklorist, particularly because when he writes as Samuel Keyes, his soft horror stories show a stronger grasp of what is needed to make a well-crafted and exciting story. Eric Brown's 'Paramathia' (*Interzone*, July) also suffers from insufficient plotting, as well as providing a second telepathic detective. Again, the situation is classic: sibling investigates brother's mysterious death. As it turns out, he was trying to save the planet's inhabitants from the depredations of humans but we reach the denouement without enough effort being expended on the protagonist's part and the reader is left thinking 'well, so what.' Brown, as ever, writes beautifully but of very little. As for Charles Sheffield, I do not know what possessed him to write a comedy detective story. 'Fifteen-Love On the Dead Man's Chest' (*Amazing*, May) isn't funny and his detecting skills are sadly deficient.

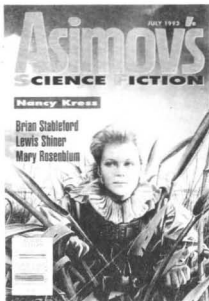
I admit to a strong antipathy towards stories which feature historical characters, as I may have mentioned last column. In particular, I dislike stories which feature any Kennedy, dead rock musicians, Marilyn Monroe and, a recent addition, stories on why the Mona Lisa smiles like that. I missed on Marilyn this time, but otherwise made a clean sweep. Will it surprise you to learn that the Kennedy story, 'Kennedy Saves the World (Again)', by William



Whyte, appears in *Interzone* (July). This time Kennedy, having been murdered, is elected to serve as God and save Heaven from disappearing: I'll not spoil the ending for you, but it's very moral, of course I don't remember where I was when Kennedy died — I was only five — so maybe I'm immune to the fascination this event seems to exert over SF writers. If I thought that authors were extracting new levels of nuance from it, maybe I would tolerate this quirk, but this story tells me nothing I couldn't derive from a halfway decent biography, so why wrap it in fiction? It strikes me, however, that Kennedy has come to occupy a niche as the modern King Arthur for many people, the man who might have solved the world's problems. Does this never-ending recycling of Kennedy motifs spring from the unacceptable realisation that their idol was mortal, with feet of clay? Whyte, though, is nine years younger than me. Can he really be driven by nostalgia for a golden dawn, before the sun faded away or is this just more Sixties retro-kitsch?

Lewis Shiner's 'Voodoo Child' (*Asimov's*, July), about one man's effort to save Jimi Hendrix from his untimely death, seems little more than a demonstration of the fact that Shiner knows the period well enough to write about it. I note that this story is adapted from a forthcoming novel, which may make more sense of what's going on. I enjoy Shiner's work, but this seemed so trivial, so unnecessary a story. Jack Dann's 'Vapors' (*Amazing*, June) is the Mona Lisa story, bringing together Mona Lisa, Botticelli, Machiavelli and Leonardo da Vinci, not to mention assorted Medicis. Botticelli has been possessed by the beauty of the woman and they are now attempting to exorcise him. I suppose the story is better than some in a similar vein as it leaves it to the reader to work out what is going on, but there is little more to be said for it.

For variation, Stephen Baxter turns to Goering, in the early years of the century, but in an alternative universe where the beliefs of natural philosophy still hold sway and the universe is conducted according to entirely different natural laws. How else to explain that the South Pole is a physical reality? Have I confessed before that I find Baxter's fiction very difficult to come to terms with? It was suggested to me recently that the problem lies in the fact that he uses fiction as a vehicle for playing with scientific ideas whereas I look for plot and characterisation and, with my rudimentary grasp of science, don't appreciate the scope of his vision. This may be true but I remain unconvinced by an argument which seems to suggest that the deficiencies of fiction must be forgiven because I don't follow the science. If I want to study science, I read a textbook, not a short story, and am entirely willing to forgive stylistic shortcomings. When I read a short story, I'm not just looking for information about natural philosophy. In fairness however, I should say that this is the Baxter story I've most enjoyed, and if he hadn't featured Goering, I would probably have enjoyed it even more.



Another strand of the oh-so-familiar currently in evidence is what one might best term the 'feel-good' story. Not necessarily a romance, though 'Paperjack' does come perilously close to sliding into this category, this variety of story leaves you with a cosy feeling, a suspicious glint in the corner of the eye. Stories of reconciliation, stories of making one's peace with the world, with one's partner or family, stories of noble self-sacrifice — they all slot in here. Kristine Kathryn Rusch turned in a particularly soppy example of this with 'Good Wishes' in, alas, her own magazine (*F&SF*, June). A woman, whose grandfather has just announced her engagement, ponders on her own marriage and unearths a mysterious gift she was given on her wedding day. Okay, so June is a time for brides but this is sentimental clap-trap with a dash of inexplicable time-travel thrown in for good measure and hardly worthy of a magazine like *F&SF*.

E M Goldman's 'Metastasis', in the same magazine and issue, is more of a puzzle. While I understand the frustrations and lost hopes which lie at the heart of the story, I'm not convinced by the solution. Were my husband, depressed by early retirement, to decide to turn himself into a tree in the living room, I cannot believe I would accept this quite so passively as does the character. Obviously, it is a reflection of the nature of the relationship but I found the portrayal of the family that never comes by and her self-sacrificing nobility just a little too pat for my taste. More could have been done with the idea. In the same vein, I am at a loss to understand why Sandra Rector and P M F Johnson felt obliged to write 'A Dwelling in the Evening Air' (*Amazing*, July) in which an embittered man sets off after the American Civil War to look for his son who has changed his name and disappeared. So the father prevented the son from becoming an artist and now feels remorse, but I don't think this is enough to sustain a story, particularly when certain historical facts on which the story

supposedly hangs, are anything but fact.

Jeffrey D Kooistra, a man whose Fifties attitudes I found so repellent in my last column, turns in a story for *Analog* which tugs at the heart-strings in a much more satisfactory way. The unoriginally-titled 'Dad' (*Analog*, June) (as opposed to 'Love, Dad', one of his offerings last year) concerns a man who has hidden from his shame in totalling a space ship by creating his own computer-generated childhood within his life-support capsule. It is the perfect all-American backwoods childhood, made all the more touching by the revelation that the man, in reality, had a harsh upbringing. Sometimes dreams can be satisfying.

The oddest romance, though, was James Patrick Kelly's 'Chemistry' (*Asimov's*, June). In this story, supposedly inspired by the romantic comedies of Connie Willis, Kelly has his two female characters visit The Hothouse, a night club with a difference. You are almost guaranteed to find a partner, thanks to the unique service involving pheromones. 'Emotions', says one character, 'aren't magic. They're reproducible brain states', which gives you some idea of just how far life has deteriorated. Marja is soon well away but Lily, coerced into attending, is not so convinced. Her encounters with Steve, who tries so desperately to sell himself to her as a viable proposition, had me cringing with embarrassment, more so when the story unravels to its conclusion, which I'll not spoil for you. Kelly's portrayal of people desperate for a partner is perhaps not that unusual. A quick glance through the ever-expanding Personal column of any paper shows that the world is full of lonely people, but Kelly shows us that there is always a new level of desperation to be attained, always a new solution to the problem.

This leads us into the big theme for these last two months, namely nano-technology. *Analog* (June) carried a story by Mark I Halverson, 'Incident at the Angel of Boundless Compassion', a title almost as long as the story itself. In this lengthy tale, we see a woman's disintegration when her nano-enhancement goes wrong, both from the human point of view and from the point of view of the nano-machines who, needless to say, have a rather different attitude to the whole affair. Mutant nanotechnology is a serious issue but Halverson seems to have reduced it to the level of yet more problem-solving with no regard for moral or social issues. Neither was I entirely convinced by the lengthy descriptions of nano-eye activity, which seemed to me to be little more than massive info-dumping about the probable workings of a technology which is still in its infancy. Typical *Analog*-style speculation, but is it fiction? And can I accept a portrayal of the effects of nano-technology on a woman which seem to imply that all she wants is a good time with lots of men? How, I wonder, would a woman write about it?

As it happened, I found out sooner than I ex-

pected for Nancy Kress turned in a story for *Asimov's* (July), which addressed this very problem. 'Dancing on Air' is set in a time where bioenhancement is the norm, indeed expected. The narrator's daughter is training to be a ballerina, her aim being to enter a company where bioenhancement is supposedly forbidden, the idea being that this company offers true art. Ballet dancers are dying in mysterious circumstances and it is becoming clear that their bioenhancement is failing. Then, a dancer at her daughter's company dies and it becomes apparent that all is not as it ought to be at the company. Thus, we have a narrator sick with worry about her own child, driven to discover what's really happening.

Where Kress and Halvorsen differ in their approach is in the supposition that bioenhancement is automatically a good thing. For Halvorsen, the question just doesn't arise. His story is directed towards solving the current problem rather than wondering whether it should have been allowed to come about in the first place. Kress's concern about the need for such things is much more evident. It's analogous, if you like, to the current use of steroids in sport. Without them, athletes just don't stand a chance against those who do use them. You can argue that they are bad for the body but if using them means you're up there with the winners, the choice is already half-made. If you reject them, you're left with the knowledge that, no matter how hard you try, you'll never succeed. Kress's story captures this dilemma perfectly but she invests it with further intensity by mixing in the aspirations of parents for their children. The narrator, it is revealed, wants her daughter to become the academic she never was. Caroline Olson, the dancer at the heart of the story, is dying because of her own mother's fearsome ambitions drove her to test early bioenhancements on her daughter. This is especially underlined by using ballet as the background, an art notorious for the competitive drive of the parents.

By comparison, Jim Young's 'Microde City' (*Asimov's* June) is a disappointment. It's set in a future world where extensive cosmetic bioenhancement is the norm and has taken over from the conventional *haute couture* industry. At the same time, the viruses used to recode genes are running amok, producing a class of hooligans who look, literally, like hammerhead sharks and behave in much the same way. One of the microdors has, off his own bat, decided to do something about it and releases a counter-virus into the atmosphere. It's a lovely idea, so far as it goes, but this is as far as it goes. So many important questions are left unanswered and the story comes across as little more than a nice piece of scenery.

Similarly, Linda Nagata's 'Liberator' (*F&SF*, June) does little more than set a scene at inordinate length. In this society, vaguely styled on what most Westerners suppose to be Islamic lines, computer enhancement is illegal and yet Hani has been fitted with what

she calls an 'atrium'. In our parlance, it seems like some sort of virtual reality wetware. She uses this to escape, mentally, from the repressive family network in which she lives. She is the daughter of an exiled revolutionary and her uncle has taken extraordinary steps to ensure that his family is not tainted by this. I felt that while Nagata had assembled the elements of a promising story, she didn't do anything with them. The 'wetware' is a distraction from the real story, the identity of her cloned sister, and the ending, a resolution to become a revolutionary like her mother, held little substance.

Of the other stories which particularly pleased me this time around, I must single out Ian McDonald's 'The Undifferentiated Object of Desire' (*Asimov's*, June). I much prefer McDonald's short stories to his novels. Here, I feel, is his true vocation. In some ways, there is nothing remarkable about this story. Aliens arrive on Earth and settle down alongside us humans. It's been done before, many times, but these aliens come almost as economic refugees, the latest in a long, long line of huddled masses seeking asylum in Britain and, as is our way with refugees, we push them to the bottom of the economic pile. They lie out in Docklands, always the traditional starting point for immigrants. They have the worst jobs like West Indians, Uganda Asians, Bengalis, Somalis before them. The women are regarded as fair game by the local boys and the story hangs around the defence of a rape case.

McDonald really packs in the social comment, first on the way post-Thatcherite Britain is likely to treat alien visitors. It's often been said that were Jesus to return now, he would be locked up as a dangerous subversive or else laughed out of town. By the same token, we see nothing wonderful about aliens. However, McDonald is also especially attentive to the problems of the alien women. Their physiology is very different and when they are

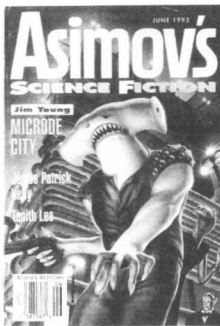
ready to mate, they secrete powerful pheromones. The rapists argue that they are not responsible, that the 'woman' was, literally, asking for it. True, McDonald resorts to a touch of the McGuffin in resolving the case but en route, he presents a very powerful portrait of a society gone wrong.

Jennifer Swift (*Interzone*, June) in 'As We Forgive Our Debtors' also provides a telling commentary on modern Britain with her story of ancient South American beliefs intruding into London's financial quarter. Her narrator, a small cog in the mighty financial machinery of an institution concerned with managing Third World debt, is plagued by visions emanating from a brief visit to South America and is gradually forced to accept that she is as responsible for the situation as those in charge. The blend of modern predicaments and ageless solutions was very pleasing, and an object lesson to those who believe that the only role of the fantastic is to retrace the paths of Tolkien whenever opportunity presents itself.

Having said that, Tanith Lee offered one of her rich, dark fantasy stories in *Asimov's* (June). Again, Lee is someone who I find most rewarding to read when she writes to the short story length. Her stories are like jewels. 'Winter Flowers' is no exception. The plot is, perhaps, well worn. A band of beings, vampires in this instance, makes its way across an empty plain to a mysterious castle which they explore. One knows, almost instinctively, that there is something very wrong about this castle and can make a good guess as to what it's likely to be, yet one reads on, caught up in the descriptions. The resolution is reached in much the way one expected it would be but there is no sense of having been cheated.

Thus, despite my gloomy comments at the outset, it is clear that most magazines have at least one gem per issue. It's probably churlish of me to expect any more than that. On the other hand, when there are so many talented writers out there, struggling for a break, I wonder why, time and again, the editors use the same writers over and over. Obviously, for commercial reasons, they are not going to discard a story by a consistently popular author but I wish they would look more closely at the gaps in between and think more carefully about the selections they make.

This column has been, perforce, shorter than I would have liked, and has not covered the breadth I would have wished for. I can only offer my apologies and cite pressure of other work, getting married, and taking over the BSFA with Catie Cary as my assorted reasons for giving short measure this time. My next column should see more variety so don't despair, and do send me review material or else recommendations for magazines I should cover. All material, as usual, to 60 Bournemouth Road, Folkestone, Kent, CT19 5AZ.



Paperback Graffiti

Edited by Stephen Payne

Signposts

Iain Banks
The Crow Road

"If you want energy, imagination, literary style and laughs then **The Crow Road** is for you, and who cares if it is only of 'associational interest'?"

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Iain M. Banks
The State of The Art

"I found this an extremely impressive collection. I'd be surprised if there was anyone who didn't find something to enjoy and think about."

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James P. Blaylock
Lord Kelvin's Machine

"Blaylock is one of the best modern storytellers we have. **Lord Kelvin's Machine** is an example of a craftsman doing what comes naturally."

Simon Lake

Robert McCammon
Boy's Life

"This book is about the magic of childhood ... McCammon has captured all of this perfectly."

Jon Wallace

Michael Moorcock
Gloriana

"**Gloriana**...remains one of Moorcock's best works, a delightfully wicked fusion of Gormenghast, The Faery Queen and Elizabeth I."

John D. Owen

Marge Piercy
Body of Glass

"...The book's strength lies in its characters...It is Piercy's ability to breathe life into these creations which make the final chapters among the most moving of any book I have read."

Andy Mills

Geoff Ryman
Was

"Was adopts a realist style... merging history and fantasy. The best book I've read for a long time."

Steven Tew

Reviews

Brian Aldiss
Non-Stop

ROC, 1993, 269pp, £4.99
Reviewed by Ian Sales

First published in 1958, **Non-Stop** is Aldiss' first SF novel. Despite its age, it has hardly dated and still reads well.

Roy Complain is a member of the Greene tribe, and lives in Quarters, a slowly moving area that cuts its way through the tangle of ponics. The book's environment is supposed to be a bit of a puzzle (at least for the first few chapters), but anyone with more than 2 brain cells to rub together will quickly spot that it's all set onboard a generation starship. However, something has gone badly wrong, and the inhabitants have lost all knowledge of the ship's workings or mission. So when the priest Marapper (a particularly odious character) finds a schematic of the ship, he asks Roy to join him in his quest to find the Control Room. Since Roy has lost his wife to

kidnappers from a nearby tribe and is being flogged daily for his clumsiness, he agrees. And so begins the adventure.

Non-Stop is very much a rite of passage, as Roy grows and matures and becomes just about the only person with any sense on the ship. In keeping with the formula of this type of SF, we learn about Roy's surroundings as he does, although his attitude provides a somewhat off-centre filter.

There's a definite streak of nastiness in this book. The religion of the tribes is sick and warped and Aldiss occasionally revels in its perverseness. Roy Complain is not an admirable person and kills off the only decent person on the ship in a fit of pique. There is also a vicious streak of childlike cruelty in the societies on the ship.

The final denouement works well, although the clues to it are laid on fairly early and not difficult to spot. Certainly nothing is dragged out of the hat.

You could do a lot worse than read this book. It's a well crafted, if lightweight, SF novel. It's also very British. However, Aldiss did go on to write much better books and it's worth bearing that in mind.

Iain Banks
The Crow Road

Abacus, 1993, 501pp, £6.99
Reviewed by Martyn Taylor

This is of 'associational interest' (as **Locus** has it) because Banks is the Iain M. Banks of the Culture novels. Could have fooled me. Those books are stylized to death, long, slow and boring. **The Crow Road** is achingly well written, long but not long enough, fizzles like sherbert and had me wanting even more when the plot had been neatly wound up. The difference? Characters, lots and lots of fascinating characters who jump off the page.

The narrator is Prentice McHoan, youngest scion of an affluent Scottish family, all black 501s, Docs and tortured love life whose Beatrice wants stand up comic brother Lewis. Prentice is a prat, but so vividly drawn that he transcends all that in his endeavour to plumb the depths of the family secret - and a black secret it is too. Most of the investigation seems to take place under the influence of lakes of scotch and vast quantities of every other intoxicant available to modern man. This could be a recipe for boredom, but Banks sets it against a family background which teeters on the brink of being a bourgeois Broons, though avoids becoming cartoon, largely because of the vigour of his writing and the sheer life with which he imbues his characters. Boredom is never on the menu.

The Crow Road reads like a high class TV mini-series written by a combination of Leslie Thomas, Gore Vidal and John Updike. I wanted it to go on and on. If you want energy, imagination, literary style and laughs then **The Crow Road** is for you, and who cares if it is only of 'associational interest'?

Iain M. Banks
The State of The Art
Penguin, 1993, 216pp, £5.99
 Reviewed by Cherith Baldry

This collection of short fiction may not be entirely new to many readers, as the hardback edition was published in 1991 and the shorter stories have appeared in various magazines from 1987 onwards. The title story, however, which is a Culture novella, was new to Britain when it came out in hardback, and if you didn't read it then, the collection is worth buying for this story alone.

'The State of The Art' is about a Culture starship which has discovered and is observing Earth in the late 1970's. Banks is therefore able to contrast the hi-tech, free-wheeling world of the Culture with a range of Earth societies which most of the observers see as appallingly primitive and destructive. The alien viewpoint gives Banks ample opportunity for satire and social commentary, but the novella is deeper than that, because Banks also explores the morality of the Culture in merely observing and not trying to save the world from its destructiveness, and raises the question of whether Earth, for all its faults, might not have a vitality which the Culture lacks. At the same time, the serious themes don't outweigh the work; Banks displays all his usual wit and style and the novella has a tightly satisfying ending.

Along with the novella is a handful of short fiction that anyone might want to find space on their shelves for: 'A Gift from the Culture', which makes use of the same background, the allegorical 'Road of Skulls', the wickedly funny 'Odd Attachment', and more: Banks in a variety of moods and styles that might not be familiar to readers who know him only from his novels.

I found this an extremely impressive collection. I'd be surprised if there was anyone who didn't find something to enjoy and think about.

James P. Blaylock
Lord Kelvin's Machine
Grafton, 1993, 244pp, £4.99
 Reviewed by Simon Lake

In **Lord Kelvin's Machine** James Blaylock offers adventure on a grand scale, from passing comets to time machines, all neatly packaged in a plot brimming with wit and imagination. Largely set in what the blurb on the back cover describes as 'a Victorian London that never quite existed', Blaylock belies the fact that he is an American by conjuring up the feel of 19th century England with the kind of authenticity usually associated with writers like Keith Roberts or Michael Moorcock.

The story itself is divided into three sections, each dealing with a different aspect of a long running confrontation between scientist and detective Langdon St. Ives and his nemesis, the evil Dr. Ignacio Narbondo. Narbondo is responsible for the death of St. Ives' wife and at various stages in the book attempts outlandish schemes to hold the world to ransom. While St. Ives works methodically to bring Narbondo to justice, it emerges that various other people are searching for the evil doctor too.

As ever, Blaylock populates his text with a colourful array of characters while allowing the story to unfold in leisurely, but beguiling fashion. Lord Kelvin (as alluded to in the books' title) makes only a brief appearance, but the machine he invents, a complex and powerful magnetic device, becomes the focus for much of the action as both Narbondo and St. Ives seek to adapt it for their own purposes. A suitably inventive climax ties up various loose ends and allows the author to take an engaging look at some of the logical pitfalls of time travel.

Of course, it's hard to do justice to the magic and charm of this book within the space of a short review. Those who have read any of Blaylock's other books will probably need no further recommendation to explore further. For the uninitiated I can only add my personal opinion that Blaylock is one of the best modern storytellers we have. **Lord Kelvin's Machine** is simply an example of a craftsman doing what comes naturally.

Moyra Caldecott
The Winged Man
Headline, 1993, 371pp, £5.99
 Reviewed by Sue Thomason

This historical romance-comedy tells the life story of Bladud, legendary founder of the town of Bath and father of King Lear. The author has thoroughly researched her theme (29 pages of the text are notes and bibliography), drawing mainly on Geoffrey of Monmouth and Celtic literature to painstakingly reconstruct a coherent story from sketchy or fragmentary records and parallel myths.

Bladud, son of an early Iron Age British king, has a birth and childhood accompanied by portents. He is his father's chosen heir over his brother and bitter rival, Leil. He marries

Rheinid, a neighbouring king's daughter, but leaves her and her young son Lear to journey to Greece in fulfillment of a vow made to his ancestors, the line of Brutus of Troy. In Greece he meets and eventually marries Alcestis, princess of Boeotia, who is identical in appearance to Imogene, wife of Brutus (who has appeared to him in vision). When Alcestis learns of her co-wife, she asks Bladud to divorce Rheinid. He returns to Britain in order to do this, where he is discovered to have contracted a skin disease on the journey and debarrs from the kingship. He leaves the court and takes work as a swineherd. He cures his skin disease by imitating his pigs and wallowing in the hot healing mud of Sul's spring. He becomes king after his father, brings Alcestis and Greek culture to Britain, and eventually dies in an attempt to emulate Daedalus by flying (in a prototype hand-glider).

I found the story lifeless and unconvincing. Bladud is presented as an unappealing character. He has little insight into his role and seems unable to learn from his mistakes. He has many Otherworld visions, but instead of being powerful evocations of mystery or cathartic turning-points, they are treated completely matter-of-factly and seem to have no influence on, or relevance to, the main course of the story. The other characters are one-dimensional stereotypes; Rheinid the sexual temptress, Alcestis the pure and rational innocent, Leil the evil brother, Yarak the earth-wise but emotional wild man or primitive, Fergal the wily Druid. Caldecott has been unable to convey to me her obvious care for Britain's mythic history. In faithfully preserving the letter of her text, she seems to have mislaid its spirit.

Michael Crichton
Jurassic Park
Arrow, 1993, 400pp, £4.99
 Reviewed by Colin Bird

With the mega-blockbuster movie and the scientific debate about **Jurassic Park's** rationale it's hard to recall that it all started with this book. A thinly veiled screenplay-in-waiting, the novel reads like a movie storyboard with illustrative charts and graphs. Crichton's style relies heavily on his impressive research and his ability to blend the latest scientific speculation with a tightly paced narrative. Although disguised by its best seller status, this is both a genuine Science Fiction novel and one of the most exciting thrillers for years.

The book features the author's well known mistrust of the headlong rush for new scientific discoveries and the consequent lack of weighted judgement, something the scientific community takes great umbrage to. I suspect more people tune into the sense of wonder inherent in anything involving dinosaurs and miss out on Crichton's wariness concerning the use of biotechnology. I won't summarise the plot since you must have read it or seen the movie. My only complaint about the book is that although Crichton rightly uses the Velociraptor, the swift bird-like predators, as his



chief nasty, I would have liked Tyrannosaurus Rex to have featured more for sentimental reasons! Otherwise a fine book.

Phyllis Eisenstein In The Red Lord's Reach

Grafton, 1993, 282pp, £4.99
Reviewed by Lynne Bispham

With one bound he was free... For Alaric, the minstrel hero of this lacklustre fantasy, is able to transport himself instantaneously to any place he has seen before. This is a most useful talent if you are imprisoned in the tower of the Red Lord who is about to torture you to death, but not so useful if your literary creator is attempting to set up any sort of dramatic tension in the telling of your tale.

There is no indication on the cover or title page, that this novel is part of a series, yet there are occasional references to Alaric's earlier life that indicates it probably is. It certainly has the feel of an episode in a saga. When the book begins, Alaric is travelling towards the great Northern sea, believing that it will inspire his songs. After escaping death at the hands of the Red Lord, he falls in with a band of nomads, has a love affair with a nomad girl, and attracts the attention of the nomads' witch. However, his love affair fizzles out and he rejects the witch's offer to train him in the use of magic. After the nomads have dispatched the Red Lord, Alaric leaves them. It's all rather pointless really — and Alaric is free to continue his tedious adventure.

Andrew Harman The Sorcerer's Appendix

Legend, 1993, 229pp, £3.99
Reviewed by Norman Bewick

Now that Terry Pratchett has managed to sell the odd book or so of comic fantasies, others come a-flooding with their own. Andrew Harman is one such. This is his first book and the cover promises us "fantastic humour, frenetic magic...and lemmings! Well, "frenetic" is the right word.

The neighbouring kingdoms of Rhyngill and Cranachan are busily exploiting one another. In Rhyngill, the Pay As You Eat tax is put up to 75% and young Firkin and his foolish friend Hogshead set out in quest of an assassin to kill the evil King. The plot, which confusingly hops forward and back between two periods fifteen years apart, spawns an entertaining array of characters and ideas as you could wish for.

The trouble is that Harman is so eager to be stylistically funny that it gets in the way. Some lines are, in context, entertaining enough: "The Atmosphere held its breath." Others are, to this reviewer, very laboured indeed, and there are far too many space-filled exchanges between tediously stupid characters, like this one:

"Your move."

"Is it?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Cause I've just moved"

"Oh, alright then," said Maffew, happy with the reason" etc...

On the plus side, there's plenty of entertaining (if familiar) ideas: like the bookworm who eats up the magic book of spells and — well, you'll see; and the castle stairs designed by an architect as a "masterpiece of hyper-spatial geometrics". But there's too much verbal stunt work and too little room for the plot and the characters to grow and earn their keep. Andrew Harman will find he entertains us more when he stops trying to be so frantically and persistently funny.

Graham Joyce Dark Sister

Headline, 1993, 372pp, £4.99
Reviewed by Stephen Payne

This is the hook: when Maggie and Alex rip away the plasterboard concealing a Victorian fireplace, they find an old book, a hand-written journal, hidden within the chimney breast behind. Though they appear slow to realize, this is evidently the writings of a Victorian Witch, Bella. Not only does it contain her herbal recipes and spells, but also recounts her dealings with her enigmatic Dark Sister. Maggie soon becomes embroiled in the book. She tries out herbal recipes to cure her children of simple ailments and in so doing, distances herself from Alex, who ends up stomping off to the pub for a pint of 'Tiger' (the novel is set in Leicester). The family disintegrate further until the denouement ties everything together neatly and we discover who the Dark Sister really is. It's a nicely rounded read.

I liked the way that Joyce handles the family relations, though Alex, often intolerant, is a little cardboard. The feminist angle too, is obvious, and though there is much realism here, I suspect Joyce should be wary of didactic stodge. Otherwise, this is good, commercial horror fiction which I enjoyed, but I wonder if Joyce is capable of better. Only time will tell.

Stephen Laws Dark Fall

NEL, 1993, 358pp, £4.99
Reviewed by Martin H. Brice

The majority of uncanny stories are most effective when the fear remains unseen or unrecognized. Once the terror becomes visible or identifiable, it may still be horrible and deadly, but it becomes something to be dealt with — and, in some tales, in a facile, laughable manner.

Not so here. Even when you realize what is happening, there is no escape. And even when the crisis seems to have been resolved, there is no guarantee that it will not happen again.

Stephen Laws has provided a phantastically plausible explanation of why people sometimes do not just go missing, but actually disappear...And why some houses retain the atmosphere of people who once lived therein.

Dark Fall is set on a fictionalised Tyne-side. It starts as a dramatic, but otherwise prosaic, police novel, investigating the disappearance of revellers from a Christmas Eve office party. There must be a perfectly logical reason for this. But there isn't...Nor for all the other strange events that occur.

A good read: I read it at a sitting, from late evening to early AM — which is probably the most atmospheric time to read it.

Stephen Laws Gideon

NEL, 1993, 342pp, £15.99
Reviewed by L. J. Hurst

In a city not far from Whitby (well, Newcastle is nearer than London) a vampire will draw three respectable women into degrading sexuality, ruining their home lives, and leading them closer to suicide, before being shot by the united women. Unfortunately, this scene which begins the book, is only one of their troubles and not their last.

This vampire is not as the others: seven of its relatives are on their way to join and fight for the succession, for this is a phoenix-like creature of which only one can exist at any one time. Whenever two of these potential heirs meet, they fight to the death in a sort of knock-out cup. The places they meet include a beach-hut on the Northumbrian coast and a mall that is either the Arndale centre or the Metro centre out of a Gateshead. Luckily, Mr Van Buren, the vampire hunter, is there to blow away the bloodsuckers with his sawn-off shot gun.

A name like that gives away the game of why this is not a great horror novel: while claiming to be different, its origins are pretty obvious. If **Dracula** was hunted by Van Helsing, the last name for a vampire hunter is anything but a vampire "Van". Giving the vampire the name of an angel does not do enough to reverse the



situation.

The review copy comes with PR material in which Stephen Laws calls for "optimistic horror" — "a feeling that the supernatural threat has been defeated and the human spirit triumphed". That is something I did not feel at the end of this book and I reckon he has missed two important elements. The vampire is defeated by another character I have not otherwise mentioned and the women are left with ruined lives. Secondly, human solidarity is of no use, the women's working together does nothing to improve their situation. I don't say that the book is anti-women and anti-social, but *that* is one reading.

Lastly, something *Gideon* has in common with a lot of modern horror is a reference to the rotten social conditions in which many people live, but only as an intensifier to characters' handicaps, not as a cause of horror and despair in themselves. Somehow it seems to miss the point.

Robert McCammon Boy's Life

Penguin, 1993, 536pp, £4.99
Reviewed by Jon Wallace

Boy's Life is subtitled "A story of innocence and evil", and this describes the flavour nicely. What we have here is a rite of passage story, set on Zephyr, south Alabama in 1964, when the hero, Cory Mackenson, is twelve years old. Zephyr is a magic place, with its own monster in the river, ghosts in the woods. A perfect place to grow up.

Robert McCammon has strayed into Stephen King territory with this examination of American boyhood, and he does it well. Like the time Cory and his friends go to the cinema and see *Invaders From Mars...* Ben had forgotten about the bucket of popcorn in his lap. Johnny sat with knees pulled up to his chest. I couldn't seem to draw a breath."

And this is returned to later on when Cory and Ben witness a meteorite crashing into the woods, and Ben's father comes back horribly changed. These children, as all children do, live with a fear of the unknown, and the realization that it is all around them.

But all of this would be so much window dressing if it didn't actually go somewhere, and Robert McCammon has woven these details into a compelling puzzle — a dead man in a car which plunges into the lake while Cory and his father look on, and then their subsequent, horrified reactions. The plot winds on through the long summer, detouring into strange byways until its final satisfying conclusion.

Robert McCammon is best known for his horror output and this reputation may put some people off this novel, but he has always strayed towards the thoughtful end of the genre, and in this case they would be wrong to be daunted. This book is about the magic of childhood and its strengths. McCammon has captured all of this perfectly.

Mark Morris The Immaculate Corgi, 1993, 320pp, £3.99 Reviewed by Mat Coward

Bestselling novelist Jack Stone lives well in London, does signings at Strange Worlds bookshop, and has been described by *Starburst* as "fast gaining a reputation as the most stunningly original dark fantasist working in Britain today" (as has Mark Morris; if you like in-jokes, you'll love this book). He has a new girlfriend, who he adores, despite the fact that she says yucky things like "do you want to talk about it?" and "I don't want us to have secrets from each other."

But his inner spirit is not at peace. Not nearly. He is still haunted by a horrible childhood, during which he was frightfully bullied by his schoolmates and cruelly unwanted by his widowed dad. The hauntings become spectral, rather than merely emotional, when Jack returns to Yorkshire for his father's funeral.

This is one of those stories that say "forget ghosts, what the living do to the living is the real horror." Which is fine, except that it tends to leave the supernatural bits dangling somewhat superfluously. *The Immaculate* is very readable, well-tailored, and written from the heart; but the style and construction of the whole makes the ending, inevitably, a little...inevitable.

Marge Piercy Body of Glass Penguin, 1993, 584pp, £5.99 Reviewed by Andy Mills

"The creation of a conscious being as any kind of tool — supposed to exist only to fill our needs — is a disaster." Thus concludes Malkah, summarising the main theme of this fine novel, winner of the Arthur C Clarke award. *Body of Glass* (first published in the States as *He, She and It*) is the story of Yod, a cyborg created by lone genius Avram, with some important help from the above-mentioned Malkah. Yod has been made in order to defend a free Jewish town from attack by the twenty-odd greedy "multis" who wield power in the twenty-first century. It is the story of Yod's relationship with his teacher, Malkah's granddaughter Shira, whose son is effectively being held hostage by the unpleasant Yakamura-Stichen multi. And it is also the story of Joseph, the Golem of Prague, as told to Yod by Malkah: a tale within a tale.

The background of Piercy's novel will be familiar to any SF reader: the utopian society of Tikva, an oasis of freedom and peace in an ecologically damaged and deadly world; the powerful and ruthless multinational corporations; the Glap, the gang-controlled hell-holes which exist outside the multi domes; the Net, the worldwide communications network which everyone plugs directly into; and the stimmies, the mind-numbing entertainment of the future. This background, if not novel, is well drawn. The plot, however, is far more shaky, whether one considers Tikva's very

existence, the sometimes forced parallels with the Prague tale or the Trojan Horse trick which Y-S swallows. One can definitely see the strings here!

But you do not want to read *Body of Glass* for the plot. You will anticipate the resolution very early on — there is an air of melancholia which suffuses the novel. No, the book's strength lies in its characters, especially Yod and Joseph. It is Piercy's ability to breathe life into these creations which make the final chapters among the most moving of any book I have read.

Robert Rankin The Suburban Book of the Dead Armageddon III: The Remake

Corgi, 1993, 314pp, £3.99
Reviewed by Martin H. Brice

Chapter I is prefaced by two quotations: one semi-biblical (intriguing, but not unusual in fantasy novels); and the other a proverb by Lazlo Woodbine (who he?)... "You make few friends travelling north on a south-bound freeway."

And I'm hooked.

This is going to be a humorous book.

I should have guessed that from the cover... Not many SF/fantasy books feature a time-travelling brussel sprout (and that's not cockney rhyming slang!).

This is "what if..." alternative history set in 2061.

What if, through some twist of social history, Elvis Presley had become so revered after his death that he was made the central figure in a new version of the bible? And what if it were suggested that this belief were fallacious, what would the Priests of Elvis do to maintain their authority?

I think that's the serious side to the book. But it's hard to tell amidst all the puns, 'gratuitous sex and violence' (though this is cut out — literally — if likely to give offence), and talking to camera. Indeed, the whole novel reads like the Book of The Film, including a cast list at the end.

I enjoyed it; and I learned who Lazlo Woodbine is!

Geoff Ryman Was

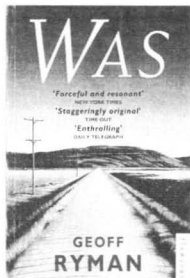
Flamingo, 1993, 454pp, £5.99
Reviewed by Steven Tew

Was spans over a hundred years of American history. It tells the story of Dorothy, living in Kansas in the 1870's; of Judy Garland, star of *The Wizard of Oz*; and of Jonathon, who first sees the movie as a child in 1956 and is haunted by it for the rest of his life. By interweaving these stories together, Ryman explores the myth of childhood innocence and the repression of individuality and imagination.

Ryman's Dorothy is a stark contrast to that

of the film. Sexually abused by her uncle, she blames herself, expressing her self-loathing in her isolation from others and rejection of authority. Society, in turn, rejects her, disbelieving her claim and driving her to deeper isolation, ultimately confining her to a mental institution for the remaining fifty plus years of her life. Ryman deals with similar contrasts in his treatment of the public and private faces of Judy Garland, and in Jonathon's search for what he has lost in maturity.

Not immediately obviously a fantasy novel, **Was** adopts a realist style, in Ryman's words creating an 'alternative reality', merging history and fantasy. The best book I've read for a long time.



Robert Silverberg (Ed) Murasaki

Grafton, 1993, 290pp, £5.99
Reviewed by Chris Hart

Science Fiction has a social as well as literary function, which is no better illustrated by shared world novels like **Murasaki**. Not many SF anthologies can boast the distinction of being completely conceived and written by Nebula Award winners, so a collaboration on this scale is a rare event. No less than fifty award winners were invited to participate in the SF parlour game of 'world creating', hosted by Robert Silverberg, and six gave a positive RSVP — Poul Anderson, Greg Bear, Gregory Benford, David Brin, Nancy Kress and Fred Pohl. It was left to the two veterans Pohl and Anderson to do most of the ground work, thrashing out the 'underlying specifications' of the world so that the others has something to work to. Their essays on the Murasaki system are printed in full in the appendix. They created not one world, but two; Genji and Chujo.

As with most shared world projects the actual mode of production overwhelms the content of the stories. Silverberg entices the readers to participate in the project, by suggesting they read the appendices first so they encounter the worlds in the same way as

the contributing authors. It is this level of participation that is characteristic of the form and ultimately spoils the overall effect by submerging good ideas with knowing fanish references. And this book is saturated with good ideas, many of them undeveloped but hinted at, such as the speculation of religion being genetically rather than culturally determined. It also deals with epistemological issues about how data is collected — two rival exploring groups have different methods of studying the harsh new worlds. The spacers, a collective from the colonised planets of solar system; the Earthlings (!) are Japanese who are in search of a refuge from an Earth that is on the verge of ecological disaster — both parties are troubled by the impact of cultural and ecological imperialism and its effect on the two planets.

Silverberg should be congratulated on co-ordinating the anthology which reads favourably as a novel and does not suffer from the sequencing problems experienced in other shared world novels, like *Thieves World*. This is an old style Science Fiction novel with modern sensibilities. Despite the high calibre of the authors, the sickly space opera diminishes an otherwise interesting idea.

S. P. Somtow Valentine

Gollancz, 1993, 383pp, £4.99
Reviewed by Chris Amies

The sequel to *Vampire Junction*, *Valentine* is another shot in the postmodern revaluation of the vampire novel we've been seeing over the last ten years or so. The eponymous Valentine is an (un)dead rock star who in this novel reincarnates himself and tries once more to set up his vampire republic in the heartlands of America. He's been around a lot longer than that, though, and remembers the orgies of Rome and the imbrolios of Renaissance Italy ("watch out lads, here comes Caravaggio; don't bend down, whatever you do"). Resisting him are Native American shaman P. J. Gallagher and Thai aristocrat Premchitra, granddaughter of Prince Prathana who got turned into a coprophagic vampire in the previous book. Somtow's vampire rifts come fast and wicked and so if they are postmodern? So what if the structure is experimental? It's about time someone's was. Somtow is probably satirising the vampire-novel genre but it's hard to tell; you can also read it as part of the genre it's subverting, which is what real genre subversion is about. What you need for this book is some loud music, maybe a quart of Wild Turkey, and away you go.

F. Paul Wilson Nightworld

NEL, 1993, 440pp, £4.99
Reviewed by Andrew Seaman

In *Nightworld* F. Paul Wilson attempts a love of cosmic terror in the tradition of Lovecraft and Hodgson, an effort that, unfortunately, sits uneasily with the tropes of

gorier modern horror fiction and pop-cultural references that he incorporates in his writing. Like the kind of best-selling 'airport novel' that the narrative clearly models itself on, this fat novel features a large cast of characters, exotic locales and an abundance of clichés.

Two implacable cosmic forces battle it out for control of reality with earth caught in the middle. Rasolom, a merciless extra-dimensional entity of frightening power, is opposed by his age-old enemy, Glaeken, a wise Methuselah-like protector of humanity. Glaeken gathers together a motley band of humans, among them Bill Ryan, a defrocked priest, and repairman Jack, a reformed vigilante, in his quest to recover two talismans and the fragments of a shattered sword which are the key to defeating Rasolom. Predictably, a race against time soon develops, with the action ranging across the globe from Manhattan to Hawaii and thence to Rumania, as Rasolom's power grows and the laws of nature are usurped. No prizes for guessing the outcome of the final showdown, but Wilson's writing is, as the format demands, smoothly readable — regrettably it also fails to generate any real sense of awe or genuine horror.

Serials

Terry Brooks The Elf Queen Of Shannara

Legend, 1993, 406pp, £5.99
Reviewed by Alan Fraser

The *Elf Queen Of Shannara* is the seventh Shannara book, and the latest in the series that started with *The Scions Of Shannara* to appear in mass market paperback, with Book Four of this tetralogy, *The Talisman Of Shannara*, already available in hardback. In *Scions* the shade of the Druid Allanon gave the three Ohmsford descendants each a quest to destroy the evil of the Shadowen afflicting the Four Lands. Par Ohmsford's was to regain the Sword of Shannara, Walker Boh's to bring back the Druids (told in *The Druid Of Shannara*), and Wren Ohmsford's was to bring back the Elves to the Four Lands from wherever they'd taken themselves and their city of Arborlon.

Wren and her Rover companion Garth follow the advice of an old witch called the Addershad, and journey to the far South West of the Four Lands, to the sea known as the Blue Divide. There she discovers that the Elves have moved Arborlon by magic to the island of Morrowind, far out in the Blue Divide. Wren and her friends reach Morrowind with the aid of the Wing Riders and find Arborlon and the Elves. However, bringing them back will be no mean feat, for the city is under siege from a constant assault of demons, with the island itself threatening to sink under the waves as its volcano of Killeshan erupts devastatingly.

In the midst of this tragedy Wren not only finds that the Elf Queen Ellenroh Eliesedil is

the last of the royal line, but that she herself could be the only true heir, and the person who will be required to lead the remnants of the Elves back home.

Formula fantasy this may well be, but it is still very readable, and will undoubtedly be a best-seller (if Smith's window is anything to go by). Brooks knows his customers, and writes well for them, with strong storylines and a fine capacity for description and scene-setting, that keep your fingers turning the pages. I'm certainly fired up now to read the end of the story in *Talisman*. However, I think Brooks may well have stretched the Shannara theme a bit thin by the end of this latest series and would do well to turn his skills to new material and adventures. By the tenth Shannara book he could be as severely flagging as I thought David Eddings was with *The Seeress Of Kell*!

Terry Brooks The Talismans Of Shannara

Legend, 1993, 456pp, £14.99
Reviewed by Alan Fraser

The *Talismans Of Shannara* is the seventh Shannara book, and the final part of the four volume series *The Heritage Of Shannara*, following on from *Elf Queen Of Shannara*. In this concluding volume, all the talismans of Shannara (the Sword, the Elf-Stones and the Wish-Song) are recovered, together with the lost Druid magic and the Sword of Leah, so that the Ohmsford heroes can have a go at defeating the evil Shadowen and their leader, First Seeker Rimmer Dall, and saving the Four Lands.

It's a pretty good finish to a series that has had some fine moments. Brooks drives the story along strongly with his usual strand-jumping technique, forging ahead with four concurrent plot lines: Par and Coll Ohmsford finding one another and proving out the Sword of Shannara, the now Queen Wren Ohmsford facing a new challenge with her Elves, the now Druid Walker Boh trapped in the Keep of Paranor, and Morgan Leah fighting with the Free-born outlaws against the Federation. The strands eventually merge together as the characters meet up for the finale and the showdown with Rimmer Dall. Every other chapter ends with a cliff-hanger, and then the story jumps sideways to catch up with the next plot line, so I was kept glued to the pages, but even so, I never felt, as I have with other Shannara books, that the characters were really in all that much danger.

It was all just a little too comfortable. Brooks can get to a point at the penultimate chapter of a book where you think he'll really have to work a miracle to get his characters out of the hole he's written them into (without resorting to *deus ex machina* cheating), and then he does. This time he doesn't try anything quite that risky. The most exciting sequence is that depicted on the cover, where Walker Boh has to face the Shadowen reavers of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, who are trapping him in the Druid keep of Paranor.

This aside, if you've read this far, **The**

Talismans Of Shannara is a must, and rounds off the series very well. Even though he works in a well-defined and unstretching area of fantasy, Brooks has always managed to my mind to rise above it by being a good story-teller, delivering a well-thought out and attention-keeping plot, with attractive heroes and heroines who always have a high degree of self-doubt, and horrible villains. He also has good descriptive skills, so we can picture his scenes and their settings (pastoral North America in thin disguise) clearly, without slowing the action down. It was this combination that kept me reading *The Sword Of Shannara* to the end back in 1977, even though that first novel was weighed down by far too much Tolkien pastiche. Seven Shannara books is a long enough run, though, Terry, so please go on to pastures new, or at least back to Landover!

Stephen Lawhead The Paradise War

Lion, 1993, 407pp, £4.99
Reviewed by B. S. Cullum

We have here that kind of fantasy where the chief protagonists — in this case Lewis Gillies and Simon Rawson — originate from the 'real' world. Both are Oxford graduate students; narrator Lewis is an underprivileged American; Simon the overprivileged Brit. The Otherworld they (literally) fall into is a template for our own Celtic era but, more importantly, continues to comprise the "storehouse of archetypal life imagery" (!): their entrance threatens the order of both worlds.

Perhaps not entirely unrelated to the fact of Lawhead's U.S. nationality, it is Lewis who emerges as the hero of the first volume, with Simon proving, for this book at least, something of a scoundrel.

This reader has received conflicting reports on Lawhead: one friend suggested that his Pendragon Cycle started off very well only to degenerate with each instalment, whereas another said that he got more and more out of the series as it progressed.

In this case it must be said that the writing is uneven; early on, still in "our" world, there are some amusing rants/diatribes from Simon and later there are some effective pieces following Lewis' progress in the Otherworld. Certainly creaky in places, this is probably not a series to be written off at this stage.

Tanith Lee Dark Dance

Warner, 1993, 409pp, £4.99
Reviewed by Stephen Payne

This is the story of Rachaela and how she came to bear a bastard child, Ruth, by a roaming male called Adamus from the mysterious Scarabae family. This is the story of her enticement, seduction and, ultimately, of how she rejected that child.

The book begins in a rather vague version of the sixties, where we find Rachaela working in a feminist bookshop. Soon the Scarabae are after her and through various machin-

ations, she is lead to their house. They are a strange lot. They live by the sea in the middle of nowhere; an ancient decrepit bunch who creep about a spooky mansion doing, well, nothing really. Rachaela is seduced by Adamus, becomes pregnant, then flees. But her daughter is a Scarabae and Rachaela hates her for it. This is the energy that drives the plot — the hatred that Rachaela feels for her daughter — and more so than the Scarabae, it is the most disconcerting aspect of this novel, simply because it is such an unnatural concept.

The book is never less than entertaining and as always, Lee's baroque prose is a joy to read. Occasionally, the text seems a little rushed, choppy, but what I found most irritating was that the book ended in mid-stride with no sign of a resolution — the Scarabae's Big Secret still remaining an enigma. I don't normally read serials and I felt I had been short-changed, so prospective buyers beware.

Brian Lumley Elysia

Grafton, 1993, 237pp, £4.99
Reviewed by Jon Wallace

"AT LAST! The novel that writes FINIS on not one but three of Brian Lumley's works!" Or so it says on the back cover. And it seems to be true.

The story opens in Borea, after Ithaqua and his Children of The Wind had been defeated by Henri-Laurent de Marigny, The Searcher. If the story opening makes sense to you then you've probably read the rest of the series, and you'll want to read this, if only to see how the whole thing finishes off. If it doesn't, then the prospect of reading three whole series before you get to this one may be a bit off-putting, but the first section of the book does a neat job of summing up the previous books, without being a list of events and people. Then we are plunged into the action.

The novel is stuffed with references to both Lumley's other works and the Cthulhu mythos, on which the cycle is heavily based, and that makes this one for the completist. If you are a completist, then you're in for a feast of mysticism, pseudo-science and mythology. This book doesn't hold any surprises, and the action sort of just happens, but the whole thing's competent enough to finish of the series.

William Shatner Tek Vengeance

Pan, 1993, 224pp, £8.99
Reviewed by Sue Badham

Iwould describe this book as pulp except that it lacks several of the virtues of a good pulp novel, like strong characterisations, a well paced plot and storyline, interesting settings and a charismatic villain.

The essential problem with this novel is the William Shatner's writing style is too informed by his background in American television and

films. This means that the book has many of the faults of bad American action/adventure programs. The scene changes randomly every few pages so that the reader doesn't lose interest. There is no in depth characterisation, everybody is a stereotype. Jake Cardigan, the hero, is a Cop with a Troubled Past, his partner is a Wise Cracking Charismatic Hispanic, his son is an Adolescent Who Gets in Above His Head and so on. The only person who isn't a stereotype is a cypher: Jake Cardigan's girlfriend Beth, despite being given a token job, is only really there to get killed so that Jake can go off and be nasty to the villains. She also provides an excuse for a bit of male chauvinism: at one point Jake decides that he ought to marry her without actually bothering to consult her.

The plot is weak and tenuous, without a spark of originality. The villains are of the 'I'll play silly mindgames with your head and then crush you like a beetle' school of thought, which of course enables the hero to turn the tables on them. The background is weakly imagined and thought out. At one point Shatner has a robotpriest in Brazil only 130 years into the future. I can really see the Pope approving of that one. I can believe that William Shatner really wrote this book, because it's so bad. However, I would recommend him to hire a good ghostwriter in the future.

William Shatner Tek Lab

Pan, 1993, 223pp, £4.99
Reviewed by Steven Tew

Third in Shatner's series, **Tek Lab** features private eye Jake Cardigan and his sidekick, Sid Gomez, on the trail of a serial killer, the Unknown Soldier. The trail takes them to the ruins of 22nd Century London, where they discover links between terrorist organisation Excalibur (who will stop at nothing to put their leader on the throne) and the Teklords (who will stop at nothing to make vast profits out of their 22nd century version of smack).

In all sorts of ways, **Tek Lab** is quite simply appalling. The plot is as banal and derivative as the worst sort of American TV cop show. It is dull and unimaginative. We know Gomez is Mexican because of the sprinkling of 'amigos' and 'chiquitas'; we know Arthur is English because he says, 'I say, old girl, what the deuce is the meaning of all this?' It reminds me of an old episode of **The Man From Uncle**, where they put a red K6 telephone box and a bobby (yes, that's what Shatner calls them too) in a San Francisco street and made believe it was England.

If you're still tempted to read this because you're a **Star Trek** fan, take my advice and stick to the repeats on BBC 2.

Phillip G. Williamson Moonblood

Legend, 1993, 288pp, £8.99
Reviewed by K. V. Bailey

Hurrah! A fantasy *not* blurbled as echoing Tolkien: instead it claims (impossibly) to echo Peake! Actually, its own distinctive 'Firstworld' universe – to get acquainted with which read the Appendix first. Preceding novels have recounted adventures of Bindig, the young merchant-adventurer, who here arrives at Ravenscrag synchronously with the traumatic birth of a male heir to the ruling couple and the menarche of his aptly named sister, Moonblood. Both of these events act as conductors for the fulfilment of a curse laid on Ravenscrag by an evil sorcerer of former days. Bindig, an adept of the Zan-Chassim (= Mysterious Ascent), defuses the curse by a mixture of detective work, courage and liaison with the dead and their corporeal ambassadors; this all in the ambience of the cover-illustrated Gothic castle, which interiorly perhaps does bear some resemblance to Gormenghast.

In a recent **Concatenation** I was struck by Storm Constantine's criterion for 'good' books of revived traditional fantasy. They should make the readers 'aware of the (fantasy) world's existence before the story they're reading took place, how it is events in the imagined past'. In **Moonblood** the 'Legend and Bane of Ravenscrag' are the establishing channels of such awareness, the rites of passage of birth and menarche the immediate means. An eclectic booklet which includes Bettelheim, Dawkins, Grimm, Jung, Frazer and Levi-Strauss indicates some of the springs of Williamson's symbolism and allegory. He is an excellent storyteller – though with a weakness for high-pitched smile and such monstrous nomenclature as 'The Sharing Sisterhood of the Hallowed Blood'. This not being a work of science fiction, he may get away with an eclipsed *crescent* moon, for what is the shadow's source remains ambiguous. Quibbles aside, I read enjoyably to the end and then turned back from the metaphysical/cosmogonic Appendix to the mystic/magical Prelude to match up the two.

Shared Worlds

Michael Jan Friedman Star Trek T N G: Reunion

Pocket Books, 1993, 343pp, £4.50
Reviewed by Norman Beswick

Old memories are stirred as Jean Luc Picard is reunited with the crew of the USS *StarGazer*, his previous ship, to serve as honour escort to Morgen, new hereditary ruler of the Daa'vit Empire. All the main characters bring significant hang-ups and remembered

unhappiness with them. Humans, Klingons, and Daa'vit interact uneasily, till an unexpected disaster throws them into a 'slipstream' travelling at 'five thousand ninety four times the speed of light' (I quote the odd wording of the text on page 124: can it be right?). A would-be murderer strikes within their midst; and when they contrive an escape from the slipstream, they find themselves in Romulan hostile space.

The complex interactions of a mixed cast of characters are competently enough handled; in the end most of them have (of course) learnt heart-warming personal lessons. As in many such stories, the technical disasters remain (to this reader) only partially explained, but if you ever find yourself travelling at 'Warp five point nine four' and unable to stop, you'll know a possible remedy to try. This book is fine for invalids, insomniacs, children new to the genre, and anyone wanting a thoroughly undemanding read.

Mel Gilden Star Trek: The Starship Trap

Titan, 1993, 242pp, £3.99
Reviewed by Max Sexton

The story goes like this: Conrad Kent, a self-serving diplomat and pencil neck, verbally fences with Kirk who represents military professionalism; and to underline Kent's underheadness, he puts the Enterprise at risk. Kent also has a beautiful, but intelligent, assistant Helen Payton, who is efficient, authoritative and sexy. She attracts Kirk, but is promised to another, and pointlessly occupies the first third of the book only to disappear from the plot except for fleeting appearances near the end. The Enterprise arrives at a mysterious planet where loopy Doctor Omega plans to get rid of war by killing excessive numbers of people. At this point, a pulp story needs a gimmick and Omega has developed the 'Aleph' or gateway to parallel universes. The Enterprise is attacked by Omega, enters a parallel universe and has to get back to stop Omega before he can destroy our universe. Helen Payton pops up again because by a curious coincidence she has the device that will save the Enterprise, only to disappear from the plot again. Will Omega be defeated? Well, I'm not saying, but if you have enjoyed reading John Campbell, Ron Hubbard or E. E. Smith, enjoy films starring Michael Douglas and would like to vote Republican, buy this book.

Simon Hawke Star Trek T N G: The Romulan Prize

Titan, 1993, 279pp, £3.99
Reviewed by Chentih Baldry

I'm probably not the best person to review this book. Having a great affection for the original **Star Trek**, I'm incapable of regarding **The Next Generation** as anything but an upstart, a cardboard replica. So this is the first **The Next Generation** novel I have read.

It suffers from the problems of any novel where the author is writing about a universe created by others. There is little scope for the individual imagination. Simon Hawke does not even have the strong and quirky characters of the original *Star Trek* to work with; the characters of *The Next Generation* have the air of being assembled by a committee. None of this is Simon Hawke's fault; he does a competent and honest job of storytelling, but his material is thin indeed.

So what have we here? With the Klingons now friendly, the Romulans have been promoted to Top Villains, and there is a new design of Romulan Warbird, Romulans over-running The Enterprise and a quarantined planet with some very strange denizens. If this sounds familiar, it's because it is familiar. Still, in the words of Miss Jean Brodie, "For people who like this kind of thing, this is the kind of thing they like." And they will.

Christopher Kubasik *Battletech: Ideal War*

ROC, 1993, 280pp, £4.99
Reviewed by Martyn Taylor

Every so often any reviewer will receive a book so stunningly awful that the only critical response is to allow one's eyes to glaze over and the dribble to flow free. *Ideal War* is worse than that.

Feudalism in space, wars fought by a cross between Imperial Walkers and Transformers, a new chivalrous order, regurgitation of Kubasik's Viet Nam experience, tissue characters and a first 100 pages of info-dump which would make even a dotard Heinlein flinch. Nothing here is new except a pornographic glorifying in war to make even Jerry Pournelle think again. Kubasik evidently paid as little attention in English lessons as he did in History, because his grasp of syntax (?) indicates English is not even his fifth language. From a structural and literary viewpoint this is the worst book I have read. It has no redeeming features.

What more can I say? Don't touch this with your worst enemy's barge pole. Join Greenpeace and protect the trees. Don't read it. I did that for you. Be grateful.

V. E. Mitchell *Star Trek:*

Windows on a Lost World

Titan, 1993, 275pp, £3.99
Reviewed by Jon Wallace

There's something daunting about reviewing book 60 in a series. Regular readers already know what they like, casual readers really want to know if they have to read the preceding 59 volumes to understand what's going on. Luckily this book is 60 in a series based on the entrenched cultural icon, *Star Trek*.

The first thing that you find in this book is that you don't have to worry about all the character development that you've missed by not reading the rest of the series. These guys are just how you remember them from TV. Kirk is an impatient adventurer, McCoy is a

crusty doctor, Chekov thinks that everything was invented in Russia, Spock is...Well, Spock is a Vulcan, and so on down the cast list. There is even the invariable sacrificed security man.

Members of a team investigating alien ruins step into an alien transporter beam and disappear. Captain Kirk goes after them and finds himself in a situation that is going to need all his resources to resolve.

Fans of the TV series will slip into familiar territory, the puzzle is neat, its solution satisfactory and Kirk gets a chance to make an impassioned speech. Really that's all you need.

Timothy Zahn *The Last Command*

Bantam, 1993, 407pp, £9.99

Paul Davids & Hollace Davids *Zorba The Hutt's Revenge*

Bantam, 1993, 94pp, £2.99

Paul Davids & Hollace Davids *Mission From Mount Yoda*

Bantam, 1993, 95pp, £2.99
Reviewed by L. J. Hurst

Timothy Zahn has finished his trilogy with another blockbuster. Admiral Thrawn, who has planned to take over the universe, is defeated and the lunatic C'baoth who has Jedi powers is undone. All only comes to an end after a multitude of plots, hair's-breath escapes and chases across the universe, but when it does, it gives an impression of being like Mac West's choice in men:—satisfying through being big and stupid. I am not sure whether it was part of Zahn's intention that I felt an identity with Thrawn in his cunning battle plans, but I did, and I'm not sure what this says about the heroes of the films and books.

On the other hand my feelings about the other two books are much more certain: they stink. Aimed at a readership in the age-range 9+, they make unattractive reading. Three things explain this: firstly (and even Zahn has problems with this, which make me think it is intentional), the dialogue is full of a twee familiarity; secondly, the world is filled with polysyllabically named devices, so you find the characters saying things like, "Han and I will navigate, Chewie," Princess Leia said. "I think Han still doesn't believe how well I can fly a Corellian Action VI Transport spaceship. Shall I show him?" And thirdly, the authors randomly use longer more cumbersome words when they could have used shorter synonyms (such as "timepiece" for clock, "apocryphal" for thanks, "illuminate" for lights). Examined closely because of these last two points, the books make difficult reading (rating 75 and 76 respectively on a Flesch analysis), about as difficult as adult novels by Mary Gentle, Van Vogt or Gene Wolf, and 10 points more difficult than one of Robert Heinlein's juveniles aimed at an older, teenage readership.

What all three books have in common is a tendency to appear to technical and to work on the appearance. So in Zahn, for example, Princess Leia lands on Honoghr and goes where there is "what appeared to be the food storage/preparation module from a small spaceship." The simple English word for a food storage/preparation module on any kind of ship is galley, but the Princess who is familiar with the handling of a Corellian Action VI Transport spaceship is unfamiliar with such a term apparently. Or is it Zahn's attempts at defamiliarisation that leads him to these convolutions? Most likely it is.

If the universe of *Star Wars* is strange enough, should it need to be portrayed in this way? In *Mad Max II*, Max and his captive, the Autogyro pilot, walk through the desert; when the picture fades in we know they have been walking and talking for a long time. "Lingerine," says the pilot. "Do you remember Lingerine?" There is the portrayal of another world, no longer anything like our own. The roots of these books are too shallowly sunk in this one.

David Ferring *Warblade*

Boxtree, 1993, 255pp, £3.99

Jack Yeovil *Drachenfels*

Boxtree, 1993, 233, £3.99
Reviewed by Andy Sawyer

The *Warhammer* books created a lot of attention when they first appeared, partly because of the involvement of Big Name Writers, though these are the only ones I've read. New readers start here. The *Warhammer* world is typical game-book fare; that is, dwarves, elves and lots of violence, but more interesting than most through its Central-European flavour, echoing Wagner and the Grimms as much as Tolkien.

Warblade is volume three of the trilogy. I found this no problem, but I suspect those who followed the hero through *Konrad* and *Shadowbreed* will find the constant plot recapitulation irritating. Konrad himself has mysterious origins and his search for the secret of his destiny involves a couple of ex-lovers and who aren't dead after all. He also appears to be trying to foil a plot against the Emperor, but all sorts of loose ends from the previous episodes keep threatening to be tied up, with only indifferent success. "Ferring" (David Garnett, apparently) thinks that Konrad is himself warped by the Chaos he fights against, which (though indebted to the first Eric books) could have been a powerful undercurrent to the stumbling plotline. This doesn't happen. Fair enough, he's writing for a conservative market. That, I can accept; what annoyed me was that stream of reflection on page 235 where "who" is written for "whom" half the time. Are our top writers being encouraged to write ungrammatically because this is only a gaming novel for kids and it comes out under a pseudonym?

Drachenfels shows what can be done. "Yeovil" (better known as Kim Newman)

extracts a beautiful air of Middle-European decadence out of a story which is considerably more plotted than the usual role-playing fare. 25 years before the tale proper, Prince Oswald and the vampire Genevieve were present at the downfall of the Enchanter Drachenfels. Now, the greatest playwright of the Warhammer world is plucked from a debtor's prison to dramatise Oswald's victory. Than the killings start...

There's no "writing down" here. The author enjoys this world and the hook-'em-in mixture of parody and grotesquerie is not dissimilar to that in much of Newman's acknowledged work, with his background in theatre/cinema supplying some neat jokes as a bonus. Perhaps the biggest compliment I can pay *Drachenfels* is that it doesn't read like a book with a pre-prepared setting. On this basis at least, the Warhammer world would repay revisiting.

Moorcock

**Michael Moorcock
Gloriana**

Phoenix, 1993, 368pp, £5.99

**The Dancers At
The End Of Time**

Millennium, 1993, 538pp, £10.99

Reviewed by John D. Owen

Two Moorcock reprints from the 1970s which are wearing their years very differently. *Gloriana* (or *The Unfulfilled Queen*), from 1978, remains one of Moorcock's best works, a delightfully wicked fusion of Gormenghast, The Faery Queen and Elizabeth I. Moorcock even dedicates this version to Mervyn Peake, and the influence shows throughout the book, especially in the architecture of Gloriana's sprawling palace.

The story concerns Gloriana, Queen of Albion (an alternative Britain of approximately Elizabethan dating, but controlling an empire not that dissimilar to that of Britain in the late 18th century), and how her search for sexual fulfillment leads to crises which threaten to bring her empire down. The Queen's policies on the surface are to promote peaceful means of settling differences between countries; underneath, these ends are undermined by her Chancellor, Montfalcon, and his spies and assassins, who stifle any discontent. Chief of these agents is Captain Quire, whose pride in the artistry with which he carries out his work is slighted by Montfalcon in an off moment. Quire takes umbrage, transferring his allegiance to the Ambassador for Arabia, who wants Gloriana married to his own King. Quire the master strategist sets out to undermine the system from within the very walls of the palace itself.

Moorcock's plotting and characterisation is excellent throughout, with a huge cast of larger-than-life characters as colourful as anything Peake introduced into Gormenghast (and a Queen that bears passing resemblance to Peake's Countess). What he does

with those characters is something else again, as Quire's machinations corrupt them all in turn, until the whole plot is turned back on itself to envelope Quire himself. A fascinating story too long out of print.

If *Gloriana* is a reprint long overdue an airing, then Moorcock's latest omnibus edition in the 'Eternal Champion' series is completely the reverse. **The Dancers At The End Of Time** is, to avoid beating about the bush, terribly tedious! Ostensibly, *Dancers* is a trilogy, detailing the love story of Jherok Carnelian and Amelia Underwood. Carnelian lives in the far future, on an Earth where he can create anything he wants with his 'power rings'. Mrs Underwood is a Victorian woman propelled into the future by a time traveller. Carnelian falls in love with her, and courts her assiduously, only to have a trick played on him by his compatriots, who return Amelia to her own time just when she admits that she has fallen for Jherok.

Jherok travels back to Victorian London in search of Amelia, falls in with a thief, and ends up being hanged, the hanging precipitating him back into his own time. He tries again, and succeeds in carting Amelia off into the future, only to end up in Paleozoic times. Much yo-yoing around in time ensues, and it becomes apparent that time itself is becoming unstable, and that Jherok's people are largely responsible. Up pops Jherok's father, Lord Jagged, to make everything alright, in as daft a piece of jiggery-pokery as is ever likely to flow from an author's pen. Jherok and Amelia are re-united, and set down in a Paleozoic future (in the next cycle of the Universe) as a new Adam & Eve. Story ends, big 'Ahhhh' (or, more likely, cries of 'Thank Heaven that's over!').

The problem is, the whole trilogy is abominably repetitive, the characters are pretty daft (Jherok especially), the plotline sinks or swims with Jagged's occasional 'deus ex machina' contributions, and all in all, it makes a very uninvolved read. Probably it is better taken with a kaftan, a tab of acid, and Hawkwind on the stereo.

**Michael Moorcock
Elric of Melniboné**

Millennium, 1993, 548pp, £10.99

Reviewed by Lynne Bispham

Volume 8 in Millennium's New Omnibus editions of *The Tale of The Eternal Champion*, this book brings together the stories of the champion in his incarnation as Elric of Melniboné, the crimson-

eyed albino, last Melnibonéan Emperor and bearer of Stormbringer, the black sword that is both his strength and weakness. These tales are Sword & Sorcery of the superior kind with metaphysical overtones, and they have the resonance of myth and legend. Of course, Moorcock's Eternal Champion has himself acquired almost a legendary status within the SF/fantasy genre, but by concentrating on the Elric tales themselves, it is possible to appreciate the influence this particular character has had, and continues to have, on

contemporary fantasy.

Elric is the alienated and flawed hero, the prince who loses a throne and embarks on a quest, commonplace themes in fantasy, yet Moorcock gives them a depth rarely found in similar works of fiction that seek to emulate this type of writing. Elric is a tormented and guilt-ridden hero, his quest is for a meaning to his life and for inner peace.

In *Elric of Melniboné* (1972), Elric is torn between his duty as Emperor and his desire to evade their responsibility. The Melnibonéans, the folk of the Dragon Isle, are an ancient race, clever and cruel, taking pleasure in the pain of others. For 10,000 years they ruled the known world, and for 500 years they have ceased to rule it, although none of the Young Kingdoms are able to breach the defences of the Melnibonéan capital, Imrryr. Elric sits upon the Ruby Throne and broods, while his glittering yet decadent courtiers regard their young, scholarly Emperor with suspicion. Elric despises the traditions of the Bright Empire, yet he too is a Melnibonéan. He is a powerful sorcerer who needs sorcery to keep himself alive. He is a servant of Chaos who calls upon Aroch, the patron Demon of the Melnibonéan kings to aid him against his treacherous cousin, Yrkoon. Ultimately, in despising Melniboné, Elric despises himself.

In *The Fortress of The Pearl* (1989), Elric has foolishly left Yrkoon as regent in Melniboné and is journeying through the Young Kingdoms seeking knowledge to aid him in the role of Dragon Isle. The plot, on one level a sword & sorcery adventure, becomes a vehicle for Elric to explore the question of how dreams and desires become reality, the nature of reality itself being a recurring theme in these tales. Elric's search for knowledge, which is also a search for the resolution of the conflicts within him, continues in *The Sailor on the Seas of Fate* (1976) in which further aspects of 'the multiverse' and 'the champion' are revealed.

The events of *The Dreaming City* (1961), actually the first Elric story published, only bring Elric greater torment. The Emperor who had dreamt of making Melniboné a force for good now becomes its destroyer and inadvertently slays the women he loves.

While The Gods Laugh (1962) and *The Singing Citadel* are darker and bleaker tales, with the cynical yet guilt-racked Elric a grim legend throughout the Young Kingdoms. Elric ponders his destiny, uncertain how far he is responsible for his own actions or if he is controlled by higher powers.

The Elric stories are essential Moorcock, for their ideas and their style, and they are essential fantasy. Images from the book haunt the reader's imagination: the many-coloured towers of Imrryr the Beautiful where the Dragon Masters dream "drug-induced dreams of grandeur and incredible horror", the Black Sword writhing in Elric's hand as it yearns to kill, and the agonised figure of Elric himself, his milk-white hair floating about his shoulders, hating himself for his dependence on the sword and the terrible deeds he has committed. This book shows that Elric of

Melniboné's predominant place in contemporary speculative fiction is well deserved.

Graphics

Jeff Anderson & Terry Murray
The Cutting Edge
Lion, 1993, 48pp, £3.99

Dean R. Koontz, Anthony Bilau & Edward Gorman
Trapped
Eclipse, 1993, £6.99
 Reviewed by Andy Sawyer

I was always taught that the bibliographically correct way to cite the creators of a book was author first, then illustrator, though *Lion* do it the other way round on the cover of *The Cutting Edge*. I couldn't say this is wrong, because it's Anderson's art which make this graphic novel special. It continues the story of *Shadow's Edge*, showing Queen Sheela confronting her enemies and her own past. Those aspects I felt I focussed on when reviewed *SE* remain the same; two miracles seem inserted to stress the religious allegory (to me, they smack of unfair rule-rigging) and some of the dialogue would make the editors of Sunday-school comics cringe. However, action and character are stunningly drawn and I really loved the sudden appearance of the orcs and Madlin's reaction to them; there we had a moral reversal of such irony that I wish Murray would sort his problem with cliché because I could get to like his work a lot if it was all on this level. (If it is all his: one Edward Chateletier is credited with 'series concept'.)

Edward Gorman has done a creditable job in adapting Koontz's thriller *Trapped*, although genre-stereotypes seem to rule her as well. On top form, Koontz is capable of packing quite a wallop in his crossover sf/horror/suspense novels, but while *trapped* has a goodish cracking plot about super-smart rats escaping from a research lab, this version, while looking good, highlights how deep in the realm of comic book two-dimensionality it all is. Suspense depends on the unseen; comic books show us. Not every book is suitable for visual adaptation. Somehow the pace of the story zips to the end so quickly that any real sense of tension is lost, and the characters are ciphers. I've been fighting for some time against the viewpoint that "graphic novel" adaptations are just a lazy way of reading the original, but in this case that verdict is probably true. For all its flaws, *The Cutting Edge* offers a far more authentic experience.

John Arcudi, Damon Willis & Karl Story
Aliens: Genocide The Collected Edition
Titan, 1993, 110pp, £8.99
 Reviewed by B. S. Cullum

Apparently, according to the purist, reprinted compilations of monthly comics series do not merit the "Graphic Novel" description under which they are frequently packaged. *Aliens: Genocide* remains, however, a story told in chapters by means of pictures, captions and speech balloons.

The cover art is more evocative of Giger's original designs than the internal pages, which were respectively penned and inked by Messrs. Willis and Story. Overall, though, this part of the package is fairly effective - perhaps a little garish, bearing in mind the dark aspect of the unfolding story.

Briefly, Neo-Pharm finds the Xeno-Zip, its synthetic version of Alien-style Royal Jelly, tends to destroy a percentage of the humans it is supposed to enhance. Naturally, as the course of said destruction usually involves the dismemberment of anyone standing too close, the military are willing to underwrite a trip back to the alien homeworld to collect further samples from a "Queen Mother". The mind boggles. Nearly.

One finds the usual ingredients, industrial espionage, civilian/army friction, with one none-too-credible plot strand showing Neo-Pharm's owner becoming a "wiser, better person". Overall an unoriginal offering, Alien completists probably already have the Dark Horse originals from which this collected edition derives.

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