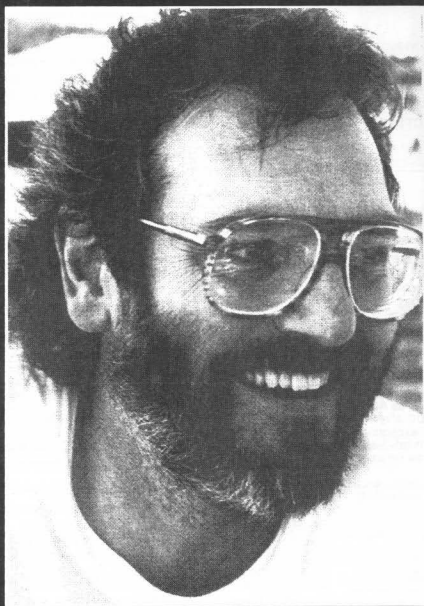


October/November 1993

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The Critical Journal of the BSFA



Robert  
Holdstock  
Special

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Maximum preferred length is 5000 words; exceptions can and will be made. A preliminary letter is advisable but not essential. Unsolicited MSS cannot be returned without an SAE.

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## Remember

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# Nuts & Bolts

I hate to start my editorial with apologies again, but such is life. In the summer, I finished my job in Norwich and started to work in Derby, continuing to come home each weekend to work on **Vector** (Oh, and visit my long-suffering family). I have less than 48 hours at home each week, so I suppose it was inevitable that **Vector** would suffer. Many thanks to the people who tendered kind enquiries and offers of help. I'm glad to say that I am back up to date now, you will find two issues of **Vector** in this mailing. The current issue is shorter than usual at 32 pages, this is partially to help me catch up (and of course there are no letters in this issue) and partly to help finance the inclusion of **Focus** in the next mailing. Fingers crossed that things will go more smoothly in future.

Have you seen W H Smith's 'Fantastically Good Reads' promotion? This aims to encourage newcomers to try Fantasy Fiction and focuses on eight books. Although the promotional literature does not state this explicitly it is clear that it is *women* whom they wish to encourage. The words "lush", "romantic", "feminist" are prominently placed and the artwork features a fairytale vision of a woman in a dress on a horse. The books chosen for promotion would also bear this out. These are:

**A Song for Arbonne** by Guy Gavriel Kay  
**Crystal Line** by Anne McCaffrey  
**The Mists of Avalon** by Marion Zimmer Bradley  
**Yarrow** by Charles de Lint  
**Black Trillium** by Marion Zimmer Bradley, Julian May  
& Andre Norton  
**Daughter of the Empire** by Raymond E Feist & Janny Wurts  
**Daggerspell** by Katherine Kerr  
**Body of Glass** by Marge Piercy

This is a curious list. I'm not surprised at the inclusion of such authors as Guy Gavriel Kay, or Katherine Kerr, either of whose work would indeed form a good introduction to the world of fantasy fiction. Some of the other entries puzzle me.

Marge Piercy's **Body of Glass** is a fine novel, but I would not class it as fantasy. If W H Smith class Science Fiction as a subset of fantasy, then I would expect to see other such works in the list. I suppose the book was chosen (along with Katherine Kerr's), to supply the promised dash of feminism.

Other titles fall more neatly into the classification of fantasy, but would perhaps not be of the quality I would expect to see in a book offered to a first-time reader. If you wanted to encourage a doubting friend to read fantasy, what would you suggest?

I might well point at the work of Robert Holdstock, surely Britain's premier fantasist. His earthy and often sinister tales combine authentic reconstructions of our ancestors and their experience of the world of myth with literary excellence and strong portrayals of living people. I am pleased to be able to offer you this special edition which celebrates his work. I hope you will have as much pleasure in the reading as I did in the compiling.

All being well the next issue will be with you in early December and contain amongst other things a roundup of the best SF and fantasy fiction for children, to help you with your Christmas shopping.

Spectrum is Green!

*Catie*

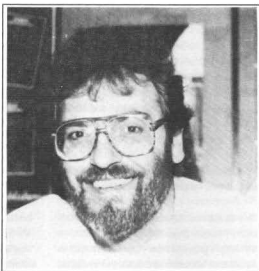
# ROBERT HOLDSTOCK

Interviewed  
by  
Catie Cary

**h**e is one of the most respected and admired of British Fantasy writers, drawing on authentic historical material to fuel his mythic reconstructions. His explorations in this area have

deepened over the years, and on page 7, Paul Kincaid traces the evolution of his fiction. Most notably, he has explored the roots of myth in his *Mythago Wood* cycle, (Sally-Ann Melia presents a light-hearted guide on page 10). *The Hollowing*, reviewed on page 14, is the most recent in the sequence. It's a fine novel, which I enjoyed greatly, but when I met him, in a noisy London pub, I confessed to a nebulous dissatisfaction with the resolution, *He leapt to the defence:*

I'm not sure what it was about the end that you feel didn't resolve. It's difficult to talk about because I don't want to give too much away. My novels depend upon trying to get new twists out of old ideas. Embedded in *The Hollowing* is the theme of the trickster character both in American and in British mythology; we have the Jack tales of which there are many hundreds, of which Jack the Giantkiller, Jack and the Beanstalk are perhaps the most familiar, also perhaps the crudest. Jack is a trickster figure; when he goes up the beanstalk, he is out to get what he can from a more powerful, maybe a 'father', figure. I've tried to compare the American trickster, Coyote, who could be either good or bad, who is the unpredictable side of human nature with the British trickster, and tried to link it with the story of *Gawaine and the Green Knight*. And my dissatisfaction with the



novel, if I have one, is that if you don't know that story in some detail, what I've said about the Gawaine figure (rather than the Green Knight figure) may not be that clear.

If you are saying "My God, Holdstock's written a happy ending story", and this has been said to me, I'm sorry but occasionally I want my stories to end happily! If you've enjoyed the process of getting to the end, I can assure you that in that last chapter is an idea, and if I haven't succeeded in making that clear, *mea culpa*, I can accept that. But it's there. Whether the point I'm trying to make about Gawaine is mythologically endearing or even valuable, I don't know. But at the end of the book, a rite of passage has occurred, for a character we have been following throughout the book. And in the sense of following the rite of passage of one man, it is the arming of the hero. But the hero is not armed with weapons, he is armed with the courage of his convictions and that has been the theme of my last two books. *The Fetch* has the same idea, where the main character Richard is armed by the courage of his wife.

**A Recurrent theme in your novels has been difficulties in parent-child relationships. Could you explain this?**

I'm the eldest of five children and come from an extremely happy, conflict filled, giggling, irritating, rowing family background. I had a really good upbringing. It was full of pleasures and rows, but you expect that with five children. My father was in the police force and he was on shifts. There were many times when he wasn't home when I came home from school. But he was brilliant at compensating when he was around.

However, a lot of my friends at school had difficult relationships with their parents and conversations at university, when on a personal level, often involved escape from home, going out into the real world, away from the home base. So my head is full, not with the tragedies of my friends, but the harder experiences; and I'm a writer, I gather from all sources. Although I didn't start to use Father/Mother-Son/Daughter relationships for a long time, until I was sufficiently mature to process it through my own experiences; it must have been there.

What fascinates me, and I've examined it repeatedly in my books, is the obsessive character of a man, I'm an obsessive character: I'm obsessed with writing, I'm obsessed with my ideas — I am intrigued by how the obsessive nature of the intellect can block the emotional warmth towards the offspring, and George Huxley who is a secondary character in everything I write, and yet is the be-all and

## 4 Vector

end-all of Mythago Wood, the whole cycle, is a man who desperately wants to show affection, who desperately wants to know more. His curiosity for the wood is insatiable — so by the way, is the author's. Curiosity is what drives me. Curiosity is what drives George Huxley. Curiosity and obsession block his relationship with his children, and out of that I can draw tension, emotional tension, and exploitation — it's a form of child abuse. The worst form of child abuse is emotional betrayal and withdrawal. So, I've got a very powerful man, who I respect enormously, but I understand his weaknesses, and I explore him in various ways, and I explore him too, through the attitude of the people who follow him. It's as if — and this would relate to *The Hollowing* — it's as if George Huxley seeded the wood with denial, with curiosity, and with obsession, so that anyone that enters Ryhope Wood loses their normal human functions and has to find them again. It's a good theme to explore, we all have something that we explore through the human characters.

I'm less interested in love scenes these days, though there is a very earthy sequence in *The Hollowing*: earthworms and all — they don't call 'Robert Rut Rut Woody Rut Rut Holdstock' for nothing! But the romantic side is always there — people become friends, there are romances in friendship. The relationship between Arnauld Lacan and my hero is very powerful for me and whether or not I work him well as a character (because it's difficult to handle a French character, who's speaking in a French accent and making grotesque over-the-top jokes, and is based on me in that he loves to eat large quantities of roast meat) but I liked him — he's a reflection of me in some ways, as my hero Richard is on others. The two of them, when they come together, have a unity of purpose, and I was more interested in that relationship than I was in the romantic development of the relationship between Richard and Helen, although that felt very natural and it was right that in the woodland in the mud and with the earthworms, they would 'get together'.

**I found that scene extraordinarily erotic.**

Extraordinarily erotic?

**Yes — but then the mood is shattered in the following sequence:**

We'd better recap... the erotic scene, as you refer to it, is a chapter called 'Bosky' in which my hero, having lost awareness of his higher functions, has become almost animal. He is aware that he is in pursuit of a woman, he is undertaking a mating ritual, and he's

drawing on what he has seen on TV, films, read in books, about how animals go through mating rituals and also incorporating reflections and memories from his 1960's culture. So yes he's singing pop songs. But I thought that was right, because I think that would happen. The fact that it becomes either ridiculous or funny afterwards depending on your perspective was very deliberate on my part. I wanted to then reflect back the ludicrousness of any mating ritual. Nevertheless, when you read the mating ritual you found it erotic, and I hope everybody does, because it was purposeful, it was the way in which Richard reacquainted himself with a woman who he had pursued and the pursuit of whom had been of higher importance than the quest for his son, which has been a conflict running through him. I really had fun with that sequence, and I loved what he was singing... but don't tell the readers.

**You admit to being an obsessive writer. How did you begin — was it very young?**

My obsessions are to do with what I write about: I've been obsessively interested in Earth Magic (not the New Age version, but in the power of people and place), the symbols, the icons with which we mark territory. It's impossible to gaze at Avebury at dawn, and not be stirred by the symbolism, by the shape, by the effect of that place. If 5,000 years ago, Avebury had a power (and it still has a power), there is something in blocks of sarsen sandstone, in earth trenches and banks and trees, that means something. It is the ritualising of stone that marks territory, marks awareness of place. It marks the link between human consciousness and place. I don't think we've ever lost that. As we become more destructive in the 90s, it doesn't surprise me that we have the regeneration of what we call the New Age, of movements directed at protecting the earth, and although I feel that it's essentially proved to be ineffective, there are people for whom I have enormous respect, families, who are finding a renewed passion toward the Earth, because they recognise how quickly we are losing the past and our heritage. They're not a powerful political lobby, which is a shame, some of us can be, and I do my little bit. I try to use my books, my work and my intelligence to heighten consciousness, but it's a question of a broader commitment from everybody to stop destroying our heritage. Not the history, you can never lose history, but the markers of history: the standing stones, the forests, the woodlands, which once had tracks and trails, spirit trails, hunting trails: call them what you will. People once knew those trails, they cleared them, they respected them. What our

ancestors saw in the woods, we can still see in what woodland is left. We see faces in tree trunks, we see faces in rocks, and although it sounds almost Grimm brothers and perhaps a little twee, I get very affected by the way I see my own nature reflected in the forests. I see the dark forces, I see shadows, spirits? whatever they might be... But people have been seeing that for 7,000 years and shaping their cultures and their belief systems around what they perceive as they clear the woods. We shouldn't be losing the woods, because we are losing the symbols and the signs and the signifiers of first consciousness. And because we can still relate to that, it means that there is something very powerful, Jung would say archetypal, about their mysteriousness.

Your question was when did it start... At eight or nine I think, it's difficult to remember, but the overriding obsession in my life was curiosity. I hunt shadows in my books, I travel in time in my books, but I was travelling in time to the future in the early days. I found that stimulating because of the sense of wonder. But I travel in time backwards in my books when I'm exploring historical cultures. It's a more powerful experience, much more impressive. The only reason you travel in time is because you are curious to know what's at the end of the timeline, and when I was reading H Rider Haggard, Jules Verne and H G Wells, those writers embodied a sense of incredible curiosity about what lay at the end of that strange tunnel, on that planet, over that ridge of the mountains. I can't comment on Rider Haggard's racism, I'm sure he was racist, but I don't remember that. I remember only that I wanted to know what Alan Quatermain was going to find in the mines; it's that engagement of curiosity, which Wells also had in his Scientific Romances. He had a terrific effect on me, and started me reading science fiction of the sixties and I also read backwards into the 50s. I read *Astounding Science Fiction* and *Galaxy* and *Worlds of If*, they were always best for stories full of mystery and I liked that.

I was read to by my parents, I honestly can't remember what, *Narnia* certainly, wonderfully engaging of the imagination. But I started to read when I was about three, and I was reading Westerns when I was six, because my grandfather used to read them, especially large print ones. I'd read one in an afternoon. I can't remember anything about them. That doesn't matter, I'm sure that something in those books about the lone rider, the sense of a man alone, almost certainly a man alone, got through to me. So I was fascinated by Westerns as well as Science Fiction, As well as introducing me to reading adult books, simply by leaving them lying around, he



introduced me to storytelling, his stories were derivative of the Grimm Brothers and Hans Christian Andersen, but he embellished them; they were grotesque, gory and terrifying. My mother often reprimanded him for telling such terrible tales. He scared my brother out of the door, but I wanted more. His stories always ended with "...and all of a sudden..."

We'd be sitting on his knee, he'd have his arms around us, the fire would be burning in a small smoky sitting room in Hythe, in a tiny terraced house, and "all of a sudden" he'd say, and at that point my brother would be bolting for the door, and I'd be waiting for the moment in which his hand would simply grab my waist and tickle me, because there would be some awful revelation accompanied with a physical attack upon the squirming but delighted young Holdstock body. It was absolutely brilliant, I could never wait to get back for another story.

I realised about two years ago that in a way that's what I've been writing, my stories always have a twist, I like to frustrate the reader's expectations, sometimes more than once in a book, and it appeals to me that just when you think that you know what's going to happen next... all of a sudden it's different. So I think he was probably the most powerful influence on my writing career. And he did introduce me to the world of adult books at a time when I wasn't allowed into the adult library. So I was reading Angus MacVicar and Patrick Moore's kiddie stuff and feeling dissatisfied with it, and also C S Lewis, although you can only read C S Lewis so many times, and then H G Wells, I was hardly aware that there was any more than Wells Haggard and Verne out there. I never read anything beyond fantasy and I don't care, because it's a great pleasure to catch up on Hardy, as an adult, and William Golding, a particular favourite of mine.

At the age of five or six I wrote long stories about skeletons. I was fascinated by them. I was encouraged to write by a teacher at primary school. He told my father that I was "bone idle and a dreamer", news not well received, but at least the teacher recognised some sort of creative process going on behind the laziness. And at about ten years of age I wrote a 30,000 word space opera **The Phantom Planet** — featuring my family, who all came to be satisfactorily sticky ends! And there were variations on themes by H G Wells (planetary war between the Saturnians and the Jupiterians (sic), Time machines in the remote past). First story published was in my school magazine **The Anchor**. I collected about seventy rejection slips thereafter before 1967 and the three guinea sale to **New Worlds**.

**Where do you think your abiding interest in the earth originated?**

My other grandfather. My father's father, who was the gardener at Westwell Manor at Tenterden in Kent. He showed me everything about gardening; the land, greenhouses. There was a farm at the back, which was under somebody else's management, but I saw my first chicken's head torn off under the arm... which I thought was great; the body kept running around for about three seconds afterwards. I think through grandfather Holdstock, in the middle of rural Kent, I became aware of the beauty of landscape and the death of chickens, of the woodlands there and the millpond, the tangled oak and ash woodland around the millpond which form the core of Ryhope Wood. So on one side I have the storytelling and on the other side I have the appreciation of how to treat the land well. There was a feeling of appreciation and order, he was a very orderly gardener. I like wilderness, but you only have to leave a garden over summer and it becomes wild, I think I became aware very early on that nature, even if there's a hurricane that blows down beautiful trees, doesn't destroy, it rearranges. We may be upset by the rearrangement, but we soon get used to it, once we accept that our aesthetic pleasure has changed. Nature has simply redesigned the land, whereas when we build a road through Oxleas wood, say, we have destroyed it for ever. Or at least for a few hundred years. So we are the destroyers.

**Although Necromancer and The Fetch have been marketed as horror novels, they have more realistic, grounded characters than is the norm in that genre...**

They are very real to me too. I live with them, I talk to them, My partner thinks I'm crazy, but I do, I talk to them. She'll say who are you talking too up there? I'll say Françoise, the frenchwoman, and then she'll say — you've got a frenchwoman in there? No, in *there*, (he says pointing to his head), and it's true, I talk to them and I get to know them. I draw on real people, in limited ways, Françoise for instance is based physically, her accent is taken from someone I know, her personality is very much *not* that person; I've got to know the character over the years, and I've been writing about her since 1979. She gives a continuity to my work, and that makes the work feel more real. This is especially important when there are long gaps between books, the refractory period, I suppose you could call it. Richard Cowper (wish *he'd* write again) used to liken writers to toilet cisterns — you write a novel, you flush it all out, it takes time to top up again (some writers have several toilets in the house, of course, but others only one) and familiarity with a character and

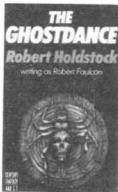
a 'realm' is useful to bridge the gap

I think it is important for a writer to be heavily involved with all aspects of their imaginative world, you have to know your world (not your real world, the landscape of your imagination) you must know it intimately, you must live there, you must in fact allow yourself to be a go-between between the necessities of the physical world and the necessities of the world of your imagination. That way you produce books which have a resonance for the real world, because what all readers take from any piece of text are not just the impressions of a writer, but the recognition of the shared experience between themselves the reader and the writer, and that's where you come back to myth and legend and their relevance, because a myth or a folkloric story is a reflection of common heritage, belief and experience. So we're sharing our acceptance of that common heritage with people, and we're having a communication with the reader, but to get that working very strongly, I think you have to live your work and not hack.

**Could you explain the process of Mythago creation?**

A Mythago in its first manifestation, is drawn from our collective unconscious, it is the memory of the hero who has been talked about by a culture or by a clan, created in the unconscious during a time when that culture or clan was going through great hardship. That is explained in the very first novel, and these creatures arrive and arise in historical times because of a need for figures of hope. So that Arthur of the Britons is a hope figure, Robin Hood, a saviour figure of the Saxons when under the heel of the Normans. And of course there were hope figures that we have forgotten, earlier versions of the above-mentioned. All my books are about forgotten heroes, lost legends. Thus freeing me to make it all up! But what imbues all these mythagos is not just the race memory of a historical or legendary figure of the past, there is also the personality and the need of the living person who has created the mythago. So that a gentle man creating a Hercules mythago will create a compassionate and gentle Hercules, whereas a serial killer will create a Hercules who'll have your head off as soon as look at you. It is by playing with the psychology and the behavioral traits of the creators that I can warp the mythagos to the shape I want. I've always done that, but I'm doing it more now, because I think it's a more powerful statement about the way we externalise our fears.

**I noticed some time back in "Critical Wave, that you said you had planned a**



## sequence of ten Mythago Wood stories...

Ten?

Were you having them on?

No, but ten was an arbitrary number. The cycle that is so fascinating to me will probably end with a final story which doesn't have a title yet, and which draws all the previous stories together. I hope that will be out in about 1995. A very big book, I think it will be a very complex book and I can't wait to write it. I've been commissioned to write it but I have another novel to do first. But after that there are stories that I want to do. One thing that I want very much to do is to revisit *Lavondyss*. Not the snowy wastes of 12,000 B.C. but the immense rich landscape that lay just over the nearest hill, from which you can see weird and wonderful structures, nations and archetypes, bizarre monsters... I hope!

**From the same source, I note that you write in your head for a long period, is that the stage you're at right now?**

Yes, they're talking, they're journeying, both in the real world to places such as Hill Forts, Woodlands and places of power to me, which is not necessarily places of spiritual power in the New Age sense, but places that have meaning to me and to which I return time and again. I go back to places from which I have had previous pleasure. For instance Savernake Forest. I just walk there and I don't necessarily see forest but it has atmosphere and it charges me up. And I will go to Dartmoor and visit with Alan Lee and Brian and Wendy Froud who are artists, they are full of magic, their house is full of images of fantasy and their own passionate beliefs in story and legend and their liking for folklore. Gradually everything comes together — the characters, their history, and the land — and it's time to write the first sequence.

I know when it's all coming right, because I get up at four o'clock in the morning, my heart beating, my head throbbing and I cannot wait to get writing, by breakfast time, I've already written 3,000 words. It always happens like that, it's a sudden burst.

**One of the things that I've found interesting in your work is that you are a writer, and a literary writer, but you write about worlds that are pre-literate. You celebrate pre-literate cultures.**

To me, my cultures are not pre-literate, they just don't write. They use more symbolic ways of projecting their beliefs and their

nightmares; their nightmares and the worries and the fears of pre-literate people are fascinating. But story-telling is very very old. I mean the ability to communicate in symbolic metaphorical terms is very very old. And yes I am fascinated by trying to fathom how people would have communicated their experience. And how they would have related to those nightmares at a time when one's experience was substantially limited to nature. But I find that stimulating and much more of a challenge than writing about modern folk. Simply because I want to understand the language of symbolism. I'm not saying that I've succeeded terribly well, but it's in the trying that the pleasure arises, and it's in the 'time travelling' to those various times that the real creative invasion occurs, and those people are shadows and I hunt those shadows, with vigour and determination. I find it fulfilling and usually very frustrating because I rarely touch the shadow as clearly as I would like. But with Sarin, a character in *The Hollowing*, I've got her as far as I'm concerned, I've got her absolutely. I didn't get Coyote as much as I would have liked. Sometimes you touch the past so vividly and so realistically, there's no point in trying to tell it until it is right. And that's what happened with *Lavondyss*, I didn't write anything until I was absolutely convinced that I'd got it right. What that means is that I couldn't refine it or make it better or more commercial. It just felt so frightening, so powerful, but so bizarre that it couldn't change, some of the images — I didn't know fully what they meant — the images of trees splitting open and giving birth to birds, for example — the theme, running through the book, became more and more powerful, more and more interesting; it kept recurring in other parts of the novel and suddenly the character Tallis is having her horrendous experience, the transformation that she went through.

Seriously, I've no idea where that came from — I was just writing words. The book got away from me, "It" was dictating to me what I was writing. I know this seems very strange to say, but I can't remember writing that sequence. I was exhausted and depressed at that point. It was then about four to six months before I picked up the novel again and finished it. At which time I'd got my characters back, and understood what the whole 'transformation' sequence meant in the novel's terms.

I'm not a believer in plucking out a magic wand so that anything can happen. I have to define the terms of the fantasy in their own logic. And then I will keep the story within those terms rigorously, but within those broad limits anything can happen. Mythagoes are pretty logical once you suspend your disbelief.

# TOUCHING THE EARTH

## The Fiction of Robert Holdstock

By Paul Kincaid

"Unless God strikes me down, it will not be easy for anyone to kill me," Llew reveals unwittingly to his adulterous wife Blodeuedd. "I cannot be killed indoors or out of doors, on horse or on foot". And so the **Mabinogion** goes on to reveal that Llew is killed by Blodeuedd's lover, Goronwy, standing neither on dry land nor in water, but in the somewhat unlikely position of having one foot on the back of a goat, and one on the rim of a bathtub.

If he has to go through such contortions to do so, Robert Holdstock is not about to lose his power as a writer. For he is like Llew, drawing his strength from the earth, and from the rich fertile loam of Celtic mythology. His finest work, specifically **Mythago Wood** and **Lavondyss** draw their inspiration directly from this source, from the same well-spring of British legend which inspired, for instance, Ralph Vaughan-Williams who takes an appropriate bow in **Lavondyss**. It is hard to know whether it was willfulness or uncertainty about his own direction which made Holdstock begin his career so far from its sources, but even in his earliest, most science-fictional works it is easy to see these influences drawing him remorselessly back to the earth from which his fiction flows.

Robert Holdstock belongs to that curious generation of British science fiction writers (like Garry Kilworth, Ian Watson, Chris Evans) who emerged on the coat-tails of the rush of creative enthusiasm engendered in this country by **New Worlds**, before the abrupt dearth of new talent which lasted for most of the 70s and 80s. In consequence, he must have been classed as a "new writer" for about twice as long as most other people, a galling prospect. The benefits of such a view are, at best,

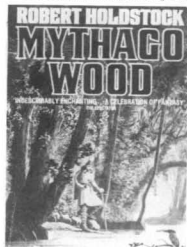
ambiguous; it can draw a blanket over the weaknesses of early novels, but it can draw the same blanket over the strengths. In this article I want to pull them all together and look at some, at least, of the themes which provide a consistent and coherent thread throughout the books. I think it is fair to say that Robert Holdstock did not begin with a flash of brilliance which has gradually faded since, rather his work has steadily improved as it has drawn together the disparate elements which characterised the beginnings of his career. The early books published under his own name were painstakingly crafted while at the same time he produced pseudonymous novels such as the **Berserker** series as by "Chris Carlsen" and novelisations of films and TV programmes (**Legend of the Werewolf**, **The Professionals**), which have bequeathed a stronger sense of momentum and narrative purpose to his later books.

His first novel, **Eye Among the Blind** (1976), was as straightforwardly science-fictional as anything he has written since. Robert Zeitman (*zeit*-time -- which is interesting, time is one of those strange threads which range throughout Holdstock's work) arrives on Ree'hdworld to attempt a reconciliation with his ex-wife and also to warn that an incurable disease is sweeping through the rest of the known universe and has sent a horde of refugees in the direction of this planet. Since this is the home of the only intelligent race that has been discovered thus far, the refugees must be kept away. But now the Ree'hd are acting strangely, turning against the human colonists for the first time

in 700 years. It is a potent brew, confused even more by the admixture of other elements, like the blind man who should have been dead for 700 years, and the ghostly appearance of semi-mythical figures from the Ree'hd's pre-history. The time-man has acted as a sort of catalyst around whom events with their origin deep in the past rise to their conclusion, though he himself is always an observer, never playing any active part in the events.

But against the background of this slightly over-blown science fiction epic there is a far more domestic and insightful narrative, the story of Zeitman's failure to be re-united with his ex-wife, Kristina, and her attempts to become integrated with the Ree'hd. And it is here that the strongest links with what will be the developing interests of his work are to be found. There is the central importance of understanding, both of individuals and of societies, and an understanding which has to go deep into history, into the forces which have shaped that which is being understood. Kristina is attempting that with the Ree'hd, Zeitman fails that with Kristina, therein lie the seeds of their future success or failure. The Ree'hd themselves are the best thing about the book, a vividly perceived yet never fully comprehensible society whose closeness to nature prefigures the place that the idea of roots, spiritual and physical, will play in his subsequent fiction. There is, for example, the moment in which a statue of a semi-mythical Plianhmar is unearthed in which abiding symbols of statues or stone and soil combine powerfully. And it is this, if anything which is the strongest link with his second novel **Earthwind** (1977).

This novel has all the science fictional paraphernalia which cluttered the first book, but it also has the first overt showing of the obsessions with myth and ritual which have become the most significant factors shaping his work. The result is a complex novel which doesn't quite succeed perhaps, in retrospect, because it is the first attempt to bring all these



ideas together. The book contains an acknowledgment to "The Office of Public Works in Dublin for allowing me to see unpublished photography of certain discoveries from the Boyne valley excavations at the Knowth tumulus" and in an interview with Geoff Rippington he said that during the writing of *Earthwind* he "took six months off in the middle when I went to Ireland to research the 'Megalith Builders' culture, neolithic man in Ireland. They're the people who chose those immense tumuli, and pecked out the most complex and beautiful patterns on the stone walls of the tombs, and on standing stones. I got so immersed in that culture, so fascinated by the art, that I took a sabbatical from the novel just to become a modern again." It is clear that this was not the origin of Holdstock's obsession with the birth of Celtic and pre-Celtic culture, but we are surely seeing the first inklings that this is his subject, his root matter, the germ around which his fiction is to take mature form.

The symbolic power of these images is recognised immediately so we find that not only does Stone Age Ireland provide the template for society on the planet Aeran, but representations of ritual and fate are also detailed in those who come to the planet. Elspeth Mueller has jewels implanted in her breasts, Peter Ashka leads all their lives by consultation with the I Ching, surface illustrations of the primitive state to which they are reduced as everything is stripped from around them.

This exploration of the cultural and ritualistic ingredients which go into shaping a man is fascinating but never more than superficial. As the ideas are absorbed more fully they become better integrated into his later stories and novels, especially in stories such as 'Earth and Stone' which grew out of the same trip to Ireland and provides the best pointer into the fertile jungle of *Mythago Wood*, but here there is little sense that what shapes the society is actually a deep-rooted part of people. And its power is dissipated somewhat by butting it up against a science-fictional device, the "earthwind". If the science-fictional elements of *Eye Among the Blind* are somewhat conventional, this idea of time flowing not in the conventional straight line but like a wind, gusting and swirling, is exquisitely original. Another of his obsessions has found a fresh expression. But again it is under-developed, as if the concept has been placed in the novel before it was fully grown. It would be when he returned to this idea in a later novel, *Where Time Winds Blow*, that he was able to extract from it the resonances and symbolic strength missing from *Earthwind*.

This clash of subject matter seems to have had its effect, because in his next two books Holdstock seems to have neatly divided the twin obsessions of *Earthwind* in half and treated both at more considered length. At the heart of *Necromancer* (1978), therefore, are the stones and symbols which graced *Earthwind* without ever achieving the sharpness of focus they demanded. While *Where Time Winds Blow* (1981) provides his obsession with time and the concept of its progression being oscillatory with the flowering it demanded.

*Necromancer* is packaged as a straightforward horror novel, and very good of its sort it is too. A gripping, well-paced narrative dripping with the usual effluvia of ancient priests and malevolent forces, blood and violence and gore. But he has brought this to the service of an idea which obviously ties in with the power of ritual and roots in *Earthwind*. Here the centrepiece is an ancient standing stone carved with ritual images from a pre-Christian era which has over the centuries, become the font of the Catholic church. Little is made of ritual catholicism -- which is disappointing considering that it could have provided a counterpoint to the older rituals and so illuminates the sense of the continuance of what is fed by these ancient roots into modern awareness -- but if he misses that one trick, he misses no other for the book is a brash, confident work which for the first time shows signs that the pithy action-narratives of his pseudonymous work have fed his other writings.

At this point one is obliged to ponder the significance of coincidence. The central character of *Necromancer* is June Hunter, around this time Holdstock's pseudonymous work included the horror-series *Night Hunter*, as by "Robert Faulcon". The central character of *Where Time Winds Blow* is Leo Faulcon. All, I am sure, no more than coincidence.

What certainly is not coincidence is the way Holdstock returns to his earlier, more overtly science-fictional style in this new novel. It is not just the central play of time, but the quest for understanding of an alien, or in this case "Manchanged" human society, and the back to nature simplicities of that society. Above all there is the way that the comforts and carapaces of humanity are stripped away by the natural forces of the world. In this sense *Eye Among the Blind*, *Earthwind* and *Where Time Winds Blow* form a neat little trilogy of novels which detail anguished loss of humanity upon alien planets, gripped by an alien past which has generated alien forces. To this extent they are richly detailed but grim fables which are excellent at creating a sense of the fully alien. But they never surrender

themselves wholly to this one impulse, because the importance of roots and rootlessness also summon up a symbology of our own social and cultural origins. When one member of Faulcon's team is lost to the time winds it is custom for him to sacrifice himself to them also or he will bring bad luck: thus ritual and superstition are still a part of this supposedly advanced and technological society. Holdstock's work always has such manifestations of primitiveness, but the further away from earth he roams the more tenuous the links become, the roots are stretched too far, and one feels that the impulses and beliefs upon which his work feeds are more powerful the closer he is to home.

In 'Earth and Stone', which takes its protagonist to Ireland in the third millennium BC and Holdstock directly into the milieu which most fruitfully feeds his imagination, the hero ends up literally fucking the earth. That is how close Holdstock needs to come to his well-spring to give his stories their genuine primordial power. 'Earth and Stone' itself comes from his first short story collection, *In the Valley of Statues* (1982), and though the stories range over the years 1974-1981, the same period during which he was writing the novels discussed above, they reflect perhaps more succinctly the way his imagination was taking him. The themes I have been exploring are, of course, there. Time, of course, is always there, either providing a gateway to the past wherein lies salvation and creativity, as in 'Travellers' and 'Earth and Stone', or as a gateway to the future, as in 'The Graveyard Cross' where a space pilot returns to Earth so changed that he must first be transformed into a cyborg before he can be allowed onto its surface, and even then finds an environment so antithetical that he is, as so many Holdstock characters are, stripped of his humanity by his alienation. It is easy to see the direction which Holdstock's imagination takes: as one character laments in the far-future setting of 'A Small Event'; 'We've lost that very valuable sense of the primitive'.

But if we are to seek direction in this collection then we have to look no further than the most recent story it contains: 'Mythago Wood'. Here the journey into the past, the quest for the primitive, the search for archetypes which give shape and understanding to who we are, are all made concrete in a story which lays the groundwork for everything he has done since.

Paranetically it is worth remarking at this point that the only film novelisation he has produced under his own name was *The Emerald Forest* which has the same creative impetus, sending its characters back to

discover the primordial within the forest.

And then there was **Mythago Wood** (1984). All of a sudden Holdstock had tapped the core, here, in the dank woodland where "mythagos" the strange personifications of mythic figures roam amid the primal squalor and violence, he had found the ideal voice for his obsessions with the dank and dark birthplace of our creative and cultural being. That this book was labelled "A fantasy" as opposed to his earlier science fiction is no more than a consequence of the vagaries of the publishing business. This book is straight in the line of the development which leads from **Eye Among the Blind**, it is just that the line did not lead forward to some glitzy high-tech future but backwards to some sort of ur-imagination which prefigures our dreams and our history. This, to point the way, is not the book of Robin Hood, nor of his precursor Herne the Hunter, but of the shambling fetid ritualistic beast-man who predates even that myth. Mankind created our myths, when mankind was but a simple thing living within the terrifying belly of nature. Myths were our shield and our endeavour in that time, and the mythagos they created were not the heroic sanitised Arthur and Tristan but creatures of the world which gave birth to them. It is the genius of this book, and its successors, to delve into that wild primevalism of the mind and present it for what it is. **Mythago Wood** is no clean and cheerful heroic saga.

In all honesty this act of primitive creation would have been enough, a journey into the heart of the forest to reveal its splendours and its horrors would have sufficed to make this a significant book. But Holdstock has by now fucked the earth and let its roots entangle him. This is genuine exploration of the mystic imagination, not just a simple story about it. So the story itself takes on mythic echoes and aspects. There are, if you look for them, reverberations from all the key British myths within this tale. Arthur, of course, but also Herne and Lleu and others, but none of them are presented straightforwardly, rather they are essences, half-gl glimpsed, much like the mythagos themselves. There is the woman Guineweneth, for instance, who plays the role of the faithless woman between Steven and his brother Christian, she is Guinevere obviously, but also an analog of Blodeuedd with whose story I opened this article. And there is the shape of the story, and particularly the third part of the novel which follows Steven's journey into the heart of the wood: a quest, of course, that most representative of all fantasy forms, but one as archetypal as Cuchulainn's cattle raid.

And we are, of course, talking about archetypal, and creativity, a link made the more explicit by the sequel, **Lavondyss** (1988). Here the central character is Tallis (another Holdstock's strong female protagonists like Kristina in **Eye Among the Blind** and Elsie in **Earthwind**, denying the charges of being male-centred which might have been laid against **Mythago Wood**); but in her name we not only get echoes of the ancient tale-teller Talliesin but also of the point Holdstock is emphasising, about the creative nature of myth and its inspirational role in the creative process long after its ritualistic role is forgotten. It is also significant that in this work Holdstock has clarified his own vision both of the mythagos and of the world they inhabit; Tallis's own quest into the forest takes a very different route from Steven's, and arrives at a very different destination (the landscape of myth is vast and contains many worlds). The wintry land of Lavondyss is the sire of Avalon and Lyonesse, Tallis takes on the role of Guineweneth or Blodeuedd, the myths are shapes into which we must fit ourselves.

There is also Holdstock's obsession with time to be taken into account, it might seem to have dropped by the wayside in these recent books, but not so, the world of Rhyphoe Wood is timeless and all time. He takes us backwards through the development of mythic archetypes so that successive incarnations become less defined. And time itself gusts and eddies about the shape of the books. Steven post-dates Tallis, while in the latest incarnation of this vast mystic structure, the novella 'The Bone Forest', Steven appears as an eight-year-old.

This novella appears in Holdstock's latest collection **The Bone Forest** (1991), yet even if he had not returned again to the possibly endless exploration of the possibilities generated by the mythago wood, it would be clear that Holdstock has now identified the well-spring of his creativity and is sipping deep from its waters. 'Thorn' is built around the ancient figure carved into the stonework of a medieval church, in 'The Shapechanger' there is a mystical communion between a modern boy and Sir Gawain, 'The Boy Who Jumped the Rapids' opens with that mythic figure, a horn-helmeted man, and so it goes. The further he penetrates back into the primitive fancies and beliefs which shaped our modern understanding of the world, the more he gets in touch with the earth, the more powerful Robert Holdstock's writing becomes.

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Artwork by Alan Lee

# MYTHAGO-MANIA

## A Journey into Robert Holdstock's Mythago Wood

by Sally-Ann Melia

"My Stories are real," cries Tallis Keeton the young heroine of Robert Holdstock's *Lavondyss*. The mythagos of Ryhope Wood are real too once you slip inside the covers of any one of Robert Holdstock's four mythago novels.

*Mythago Wood* first appeared as a short story in Ed Ferman's *Fantasy and Science Fiction*. The novel length version appeared two years later. This was followed by a sequel, *Lavondyss*, then a short prequel, *The Bone Forest*. This year sees the publication of the fourth novel based in Ryhope Wood: *The Hollowing*. So for those of you thinking of visiting *The Hollowing* this summer, here are some handy hints and consulate-endorsed warnings prior to your departure, together with such vital information as how to find Ryhope Wood, what to take with you and how you can expect to leave the Wood.

So where is Ryhope Wood? It has many names: to quote Tallis Keeton again: "Shadow Wood, Ryhope Wood, Grey Wood, Rider's Wood, Hood Trees, Deep Dell Copses, Howling Wood, Hell's trees, the Graynes... the list is endless." Of these names Ryhope Wood is the main one, the wood being part of the Ryhope Estate. Where is the Ryhope Estate? The details are sketchy. You are unlikely to find a brochure in your local travel agency. The best information to be found is in the first novel, *Mythago Wood*. An airfield called Muckleston Field is some thirty miles away, the nearest village is Shadowhurst. The wood is north of Oxford. Gloucester is often referred to as the nearest town, so Ryhope is in the Midlands.

How big is the Wood? It is only six miles around the perimeter, maybe two-to-three miles across. Although this is small, it is not small enough to disappear from the ordnance survey maps. Yet Ryhope Wood does not appear on any map.

Do you still want to go? Required objects to take on any trip into Ryhope Wood are specified by Helen Silverlock in *The Hollowing*:

"have good walking boots, weatherproofing, a good book, any medication you need, some food, a good brandy, two changes of clothing, and a rucksack, a good-sized one." Twenty years earlier, Harry Keeton in *Mythago Wood* felt required to carry: two knives, a heavy Lee-Enfield rifle, a pocket pistol, ammunition, protective clothing and, finally sturdy boots. Harry Keeton lost most of his kit, in an skirmish with a bunch of proto-Celtic warriors. Helen Silverlock survived the wood for several years.

The first Ryhope explorer was George Huxley who with his Oxford friend Professor Wynne-Jones walked into the Wood in the early 1930's. George was followed by his two sons, Christian in 1946, then in 1948 Steve Huxley travelled into the Wood in the company of airman Harry Keeton. If Steve, Christian and Harry were second generation travellers, third and fourth generation travellers are James and Tallis Keeton, respectively Harry Keeton's father and sister. Followed closely by Tallis's friend and playmate Alex Bradley and his father Richard. Two categories of traveller journey into the wood: the explorers and the searchers. The explorers are those who hunt out and research mythagos. Into this group fall: George Huxley, Professor Wynne-Jones, the airman Harry Keeton. The second group are those who throw themselves into the Wood in search of lost loved ones. This group includes Christian and Steve Huxley, Tallis Keeton and Richard Bradley. Alex Bradley is a special case. He is the only traveller to date who was ensnared deep in the forest by another individual, in this case James Keeton, Tallis's father. It is these tales of heartbreaking quests that have made Ryhope Wood famous — or perhaps infamous. *Mythago Wood* tells of Steven Huxley's hunt for his lover Guineweth. *Lavondyss* follows Tallis Keeton in pursuit of her brother Harry. *The Bone Forest* shows George Huxley's search for Professor Edward Wynne-Jones. *The Hollowing* depicts a distraught Richard

Bradley on the trail of his son Alex. To these two categories, *The Hollowing* introduces a third: the researchers. These include Helen Silverlock, Arnaud Lacan, and Doctor Alexander Lytton. All these people in a Wood, six-miles in perimeter?

There is a need to pause here and define the word "mythago". Mythago, was a term coined by George Huxley in the 1930's. The word is derived from "myth image" or image of a myth. This is how Arnaud Lacan explains mythagos to Richard Bradley: "From the moment of the first human consciousness, the need for heroes, heroic acts and a belief in mythological attributes of nature had been the empowering force behind human psychological development. The combination of the dual tensions between the right and left hemispheres of the human brain, and the aura that existed within unspoiled organic structures, as represented by Ryhope Wood, could produce the solid forms of mythagos." Mythagos are folk heroes made real. An attraction of Ryhope Wood is that you see mythagos from long dead civilisations. To see a man's god or folk hero, is to see the man himself.

So which mythagos are you likely to meet when you enter Ryhope Wood? Some common forms have appeared in more than one of Robert Holdstock's four novels.

Hood, so called as an abbreviation for Robin Hood. Dressed in green, this mythago, always armed with a bow, is an unerring shot.

Jack, a shapechanging trickster, various forms of the European Jack the Giant Killer.

Hollyjack, a female mythago, one of a race of forest creatures imagined by mesolithic hunter-nomads. Hollyjack is human-sized, female formed, with bones of mahogany and flesh of holly leaves. Her sex is moss and after the act she gives birth to birds and in doing so either rejuvenates or dies.

Ursucumug, if there was a prize for the most hideous and fearful mythago, this is a prime candidate. Here's a description from Christian Huxley: "It's like a boar. Part boar, part man, elements of other beasts of the wildwood. It walks upright, but can run like the wind. It paints its face white in semblance of a human face. Whatever age it lived in, one thing's certain, this thing comes from a time when man and nature were so close they were indistinguishable."

Ash is the Snow Woman and George Huxley's assistant and guide. She re-emerges in *Lavondyss* when Tallis Keeton metamorphoses into the "shadow of other forests" and becomes a wooden icon of primitive man.

The Shamiga, of all mythagos, the most poetic. Harry Keeton tells us they are: "a legendary people who guard — and haunt,

after death — the river crossings." Huxley wrote: "they are willing story tellers, which they call 'life-speaking'. The life-speaker herself is a young girl who paints her face quite green, and tells all stories with her eyes closed so that smiles or frowns of those who listen cannot effect a 'shape-change' upon the story"

Beyond the common forms, each individual creates their own mythago. Talis Keeton created the stag-boy and Golden Prince Scathach. A warrior and a hero Scathach aids her search for her brother, Taai, the heroic alter-ego Alex Bradley, is called to life from the mesolithic; born into a culture of lake-edge dwelling hunter-gatherers, he lives again in Ryhope Wood, bravely setting out to fight a sea-serpent. George Huxley's mythago was Guiwenneth, youngest daughter of a long-dead king. Christian Huxley desires then steals Guiwenneth from his father. She leaves Christian for Steve and the Cycle starts again. The beautiful shared image drives all three men through jealousy to hatred and murder.

These "personalised" mythagos are not ghost-like figures of your imagination. They are flesh and bone, emotion and love. You can ruffle their hair, assist them in taking long hot baths, carry them to your bed and love them. Creatures all of your intimate desires, taking such pleasure comes at a high cost. Having loved your mythago one day, you are likely the following day to stand helpless as he/she is murdered by other far greater and uncontrollable elements of Ryhope Wood. Love then death, all within twenty-four hours.

Now you know what you'll find in Ryhope Wood, how do you get in? Well at first you won't. First-time travellers will probably think it is their own good judgement and sense of direction that bring them back where they started. Only the determined explorer or desperate seeker will realise that Ryhope Wood has its own defenses and turns the adventurer back to their starting point. A page from Steve Huxley's story is of relevance here: "... A vast oak barred my way, and the ground dropped away in a steep dangerous decline, which I circuted as best I could. Moss-slick grey rocks thrust stubby fingers from the ground; gnarled young oak-trunks grew through and around these stony barriers. By the time I had found my way through. I had lost the stream, although its distant sound was haunting. Within minutes I realised I was seeing through the thinner wood at the edge to open land beyond. I had come in a circle. Again."

When you do penetrate Ryhope Wood, your first stop may well be Oak Lodge. In **Mythago Wood and the Bone Forest**, Oak Lodge is the Huxley's home, a large house on

the edge of the forest. By **Lavondyss**, it has been absorbed by the forest and stands in a sunny clearing. As Talis Keeton remarks: "Why did they leave it? All overgrown, all run down. But it still has furniture in it, a table, a cooker, a desk... even pictures on the walls"

At the centre of this Oak clearing is the statue of a horse. George Huxley describes it: "a massive structure, twice the height of a man, bone strapped together to form gigantic legs, fragments of skull shaped and wedged to create a monstrous head". This Horse Shrine is a scene of terrible carnage. George Huxley tells how he came across a man "decked and dressed in rush and reed, so that only his arms were visible, extended on the crucifix-like frame that was tied about the giant horse. he was on fire; the blaze taking swiftly. Flame streamed into the night, shedding light and heat in eerie streamers as the great stallion galloped in panic towards me." Thus in trying to understand primitive myths and folklore, Huxley finds primitive religions where self-sacrifice means precisely that.

From the Horse Shrine, there are four entrances or "Hollowings" into Ryhope Wood itself. These open the way to the heartwoods. To quote Lacan again, "A hollowing is a way deeper (...). We are going further into the wood, but there is a way under us. Not in physical space you understand. Just under, going to other planes, other lands, other *otherworlds*. Another system of space and time." To find and pass through a hollowing will require luck or bloody-mindedness, but then the adventure begins. By the time you find and pass your hollowing, you will already be seeing and creating your own mythagos.

Like entering Ryhope Wood, like passing through a hollowing, seeing your first mythago is not automatic, never guaranteed. Steve Huxley saw his first mythago, aged eight, Talis Keeton hers, aged seven. For Richard Bradley in **The Hollowing**, the acclimatization period has been reduced to three nights. Your

first glimpse may be a shadowy figure out of the corner of your eye, or a face, twisted like a gargoyle, leering down at you from a tree. Be prepared for sleepless nights of terror and restless wretched days when you will be prey to Green Jack arrows, sudden incorporeal whispers in an incomprehensible tongue, and the insults of primitive Sussex Princes.

Onwards from the Horse Shrine things get blurred. George Huxley never travels much further than the Horse Shrine, finding there sufficient mythagos to satisfy his thirst for the ephemeral and the exotic. Steve Huxley, then Talis Keeton, in seeking lost loved ones, travel to the gates of fire and to Lavondyss: "... a place of the dead, where the dead returned to life. the place of waiting, the place of the endless hunt and the constant feast. The place of youth, the land of women, the realm of song and sea. Old Forbidden Place. the Underworld." Richard Bradley moves from the Horse Shrine to the Sanctuary, which with its scarecrows and protective electronic force-fields is the First Base from which most of the adventure of **The Hollowing** takes place.

Two interlinked questions remain unanswered: how long will your trip take and how do you leave Ryhope Wood? First, the length of your journey, to quote Helen Silverlock: "You'll need three months, you should contact your employer and book a two-week holiday." When Christian asks, How long have I been away? Steve says: Twelve days. I thought it was months, Christian replies. The deeper you travel into Ryhope Wood, the slower time passes outside. Vital information and true.

As to how you get out of Ryhope Wood, I can say very little. Neither George, Steve or Christian ever came out of the forest, nor did Professor Edward Wynne-Jones, Harry or Talis Keeton. Because of these repeated disappearances, the Ryhope Estate has put up "Keep Out" signs around the Wood. To these signs I add my own warning: Those who enter Mythago Wood, beware.



Artwork by Alan Lee



First

# Impressions

Reviews of Hardback &amp; Paperback Originals

Edited by Catie Cary

## Brian Aldiss A Tupolev too far

HarperCollins, 1993, 200pp, £14.99

Reviewed by Norman Beswick

**T**his new collection of Aldiss stories sent me back to my shelves. It is thirty-six years since *Space, Time & Nathaniel (Prescences)* first gave us collected Aldiss short stories, and they were as I remembered them: short, slick and audacious, making fanciful use of standard SF themes and images without any clutter of True Science or pretence of prediction.

Aldiss has written several hundred more short stories since then, as well as umpteen seminal SF novels, critical works and contributions to mainstream fiction. New Wave, ebullient sex and the surreal suited him well, but he also wrote *Non Stop*, *Greybeard*, *The Dark Light Years* and the *Helliconia* trilogy, and excelled in re-workings of the Frankenstein/Dracula territory. A list is enough: he needs no further praise.

With one exception, the present collection consists of stories published over the last five years. Their manner is 'later Aldiss' and slick they are not; neither, for that matter, is life.

In the title story, a salesman is sent from Penge airport via Royal Russian Airlines to Moscow to clinch a deal. As a result of a strange magnetic storm en route (Aldiss's narrator disclaims any SF relevance, but paragraph 4 on page 5 is a piece of lovely, impertinent hokum reminiscent of *Amazing Stories* in the 1920s) he finds himself in an alternative Russia governed by Brezhnev and the KGB. In a restaurant, he has to listen to a long, turgid Korean hard-times story, and finds

that the woman he has been staring at is a man. He resorts instead to his lean, malodorous waitress, whom he finally beds in her foul room, escaping in time to catch his plane, which mysteriously delivers him direct to the Britain he left — and his wife.

EH? Yes, it's marvellously told, you catch and almost relish every squalid moment. What's it 'about'? A ghastly American lady drives the husband of an Oxford academic sex-crazy; a scholar studying medieval carvings in a world at war gets his memory stolen by an unscrupulous former colleague, but that's only part of it; the brother of a man famed for discovering bird-creatures from another world who tidily take to eating up human corpses tells his own tale; in a jungle two white explorers pass across into a strange Other World. They're not realism, they're not mainstream SF; they're fabrications, and if they're 'about' anything it's about how today's Aldiss responds to life and literature. Chunks of awkward reality clutter up each story and what each character sees is only partial.

Other tales are simpler. A cockroach finds himself turned into Kafka and writes 'The Trial'; an adviser to the Emperor of the Eternal Galaxy is tempted to betray him; a tottering marriage collapses fatally and spookily on a trip to the Egyptian pyramids. Three other tales are not stories at all but elegant, sophisticated jokes.

That's what you'll get, and if you like **New Worlds** and **Interzone**, dark humour and curious sex, you'll like these. If you prefer hard SF, or cosy tales about magic goodhearted dragons, then this collection's not for you.



## Robert Asprin & Lynn Abbey Catwoman

Millennium, 1993, 196pp, £3.99

Reviewed by K V Bailey

**T**he cover carries the message that Batman, Catwoman and Gotham City and other titles, characters and related elements are trademarks of D C Comics Inc, thus identifying the world that Robert Asprin and his co-author wife are here populating. It's an excellent romp, with all the crowded sequential momentum of a comic strip. The adventure's subtitle is 'Tiger Hunt' and the quarry is the scarred villain Eddie Lobb, known as Tiger, who acts for the Connection, a racketeering and arms-running organisation whose boss, Matheson, Batman, allied with Gotham City Police Commissioner Gordon, is out to get. To find Matheson he must hunt the Tiger.

Catwoman is also hunting the Tiger. The plot is an interweaving of their converging chases; Batman and Catwoman, antithetic creatures of urban myth. Catwoman's motivation is to eliminate the Lobb monster whose psychopathic personality is bolstered by decorating his apartment with the corpses of endangered species, the great cats in particular. She had discovered this in the course of rehabilitating Eddie's abused mistress. The same crusade involves her hilariously with the Sisters of the Immaculate Heart, ruled by Mother Joseph, the formidable 'Old Mojo'.

Though the scenario is comic strip, the novel-form gives scope for amusing variations and characterisations. The Batman alter ego, playboy Bruce Wayne, when in the Batcave, has exchanges with his butler Alfred which are well in the Wooster-Jeeves mode; and there are some very funny escapades when Catwoman, or her alter ego, slum-dweller Selina, operates in harness with Bonnie, the bubbly, mid-western innocent who is continually shocked into shouting 'Omygod, Omygod'. Bonnie represents the sincere but amateurish pro-animal campaigners, 'Wilderness Warriors'. Although I've described this as a romp, it does touch, with an air of sympathy and satire, on matters of conservation, illegal immigration and ethnic divisiveness; basically, however, an enjoyable entertainment.



## Will Baker Shadow Hunter

Viking, 1993, 536pp, £9.99

Reviewed by Paul Kincaid

**T**here is a cartoon by Gary Larson, no, there is a whole host of cartoons by Larson in which the hunted turn the tables on the hunter. Bears dine on hunters in sleeping



bags as though they were sandwiches, noblecoopers take the gun off a quivering marksman. This novel tells the same story, but at many times the length, and without the jokes.

The background is explained at length, if implausibly. The northern powers have engineered "The Last War" in the southern hemisphere, but were so shocked at the outcome they have since outlawed war. This unlikely change of heart has not resulted in any noticeable change in the nature of politics or the role of the nation state, but we'll let that pass for the moment. In the Wastelands a few human survivors—criminals, Bakels, for some reason, at pains to point out interbreed with apes. The resultant offspring, called Pobla by themselves or Ginks by the humans, are a new intelligent race, though to the mass of humans, especially politicians and hunters, they are little better than vermin and fit only for extermination. Now, a couple of hundred years later, the Ginks are at the centre of a new collaboration in which bears co-operate with ants, and eagles and cockroaches are best mates. Given that this new pan-animal congress seems to imply that certain creatures are now happy to be eaten by their colleagues, or have given up eating, it seems a little far-fetched. But we'll let that pass for the moment.


A fairly senior government official takes his son hunting, but the tables are turned, the official is nearly killed and the son is kidnapped by a bear. Ronald, the boy, is raised by Ginks and of course is found to be an exceptional character who can be initiated into the higher consciousness of the Ginks. (They, of course, are closer to nature so are inevitably better people all round).

Meanwhile, back in the human world, the kidnapping sparks political panic and evil double dealing, as one clever politician fans the flames to seize power. Here we get every bete noire of the paranoid and the politically correct: politicians willing to do all manner of dirty dealing for personal gain, a secret alliance of wealthy financiers who are pulling the strings of world events, scientists who never notice what is really happening for the sake of their pet theories, mysterious freelance mercenaries whose only role in life is to destabilise everything, gung-ho military types who just want to blast everything. But we'll let that pass for the moment.

What Baker has done is write a conventional ecological doom story in which nature revolts against humanity. The invention of the Ginks allows him to give a voice to nature, and the kidnapping of the boy gives him a drama around which to show his confrontation. But he clogs the tale with too many perspectives, each of which requires a narrative twist, so

that the story loses its drive. He also loses faith in the power of his own narrative vision; in an urge to show the totality of nature's revolt against man he introduces irrelevant sub-plots about a woman who becomes involved in a violent demonstration because of the gunk in her sink, and about a man who, in a straight rip-off from Kafka, turns into a beetle. Given that all of this top-heavy superstructure rests on assumptions that are too implausible to accept all those things we have had to let pass, which together add up to more than the suspension of disbelief will allow and the book begins to crumble under its own weight.

It doesn't help that the writing is at best workmanlike, at worst given to flights of visionary claptrap and plain bad prose. Nor does it help that Baker is reinventing the wheel. In an acknowledgement he freely admits to "prejudices against the fantastical and outlandish products of the unshackled imagination", and in attempting his own fantastical product fails to unleash the imagination enough. His future is almost exactly like America of the 1980s, with new devices introduced only when the plot calls for them, but no sense of background, no sense of the way society, life, dress, furniture or anything else might be different. Yet the whole book is built upon a massive difference which should have affected things more fundamentally than he has imagined.

This could have been a standard, moderately readable if uninspiring sf adventure of the familiar eco-doom type; but it aspires to be better than that, it aspires to be "significant", and ends up falling far short. 

## Stephen Baxter Anti-Ice

HarperCollins, 1993, 280pp, £14.99


Reviewed by K V Bailey

The appreciative pre-publication blurbs from Moorcock and Greenland, recognising this as grand pastiche, invoke both Wells and Verne. Wells I'd accept only to a limited extent: there are passages of "home counties" SF, an echo of 'The Land Ironclads', and some reflection of his pessimism but little of his style. Verne, yes. The book is, to use the Victorians' appropriate word, very much a "lark", though it has a serious strain (the morality of war and deterrent weaponry, and the uncontainability of technology). Mostly, though, it is outrageous sfnal entertainment, pulling out all the Vernian stops and playing dice (or is it chess?) with alternative world possibilities.

The scene of action is not only an alternative world, with a modified history, but an alternative universe (one implying the other) in which a comet composed of anti-ice, a kind of

anti-matter surrogate, starts the evolution of sentient rocks ("Phoebeans") on the moon. The comet also, before earth-capture as a second (eventually mineable) satellite, sheds upon Antarctica enough anti-ice to provide a revolutionising source of energy. Its first application in 1855 ends the Crimean War by, in effect, nuking Sebastopol. (I had previously encountered this incident as a story in **New Moon**.) Control of the energy rests with scientist-inventor Sir Josiah Traveller, a "Captain Nemo" character, though he also resembles Conan Doyle's irascible Professor Challenger. Among Traveller's creations is a huge land-liner, the Prince Albert, and a rocket-ship the Phaeton, the one propelled by steam-driven pistons, the other by steam jets, the energy source for each being the controlled heating of anti-ice contained in Dewar flasks. Just as the Franco-Prussian War is fermenting, an act of sabotage is instrumental in despatching Phaeton moonwards with its fortuitously assembled crew of Sir Josiah and Pocket (a Passepartout-like manservant), a chauvinist reporter, a French villain, and Ned, the lovelorn hero-narrator. Many chapters are occupied with that journey; with the gathering of frost (to fuel the return) from a lunar crater, which is put into chaotic turmoil by the aroused Phoebean behemoths; and with the return, this occurring in time for observation of the Siege of Paris in 1870. Prime Minister 'Glad-Eye' Gladstone ends the war by appropriating peaceful anti-ice technology to power and arm a surface-to-surface missile which makes a Hiroshima of Orleans, an act whose dire legacies I will leave potential readers to discover and consider.

The pleasures of reading this novel, and they are considerable, actually reside less in its rambling plot, and deliberately stereotypical characters, than in two narrative constituents which are in part parodic, in part lovingly ludic. The first concerns variant histories. How much of the "real" do you keep to give point and verisimilitude to the variations? Victoria abdicates, the capital is Manchester, the Channel is bridged over, lunar travel is commonplace by 1910, and Britain has achieved a virtual European hegemony; yet the First World War seems inevitable. Why? What common underlying historical tensions operate? How can disparate circumstances converge? the questions intrigue, but the whole scenario is so bizarre that speculation becomes more game than problem. Similarly Traveller's Emmet-like inventions, fictively plausible but essentially absurd (which Verne's seldom were), are "playfully" a delight—as are those aspects of the Phaeton which recall the Nautilus: the Smoking Cabin, the hissing gas-light mantles, the cigars and brandy globes. Suspending

disbelief is necessary for full enjoyment, especially of the meticulously elaborated "educational" infodumps. It's all a game — and yet, skilfully threaded into the fabric to linger in the mind after reading are those serious issues of technology and history which occupied both Wells and the later Verne — issues which do not go away. 

### David Brin Glory Season

*Orbit, 1993, 600pp £16.99*


Reviewed by Alan Johnson.

**T**his latest blockbuster from David Brin, is set on the planet Stratos, a colony established in secret from the mainstream of Human civilisation and the Phylum worlds. The reason for this secrecy is that the Founding Mothers, using advanced genetic engineering techniques have dramatically altered human sexual patterns. The reason for this change in sexuality is the belief of the Founding Mothers that male domination of society is responsible for all the ills of Old Earth and that the creation of a female run society would be a cure. The creation of a low-tech, almost pastoral society through social as well as genetic engineering is the result of this insight.

The few men present on Stratos occupy a marginal role in society, as sailors and other manual labour roles until required for their role in the reproductive cycle. This cycle is the prime achievement of the Founding Mothers, who chose to return to a more primitive reproductive model, that of seasonal rather than monthly reproductive cycles, and then chose to have the male and female cycles at opposite times of year (and the Stratos year is about three Earth years!). During the peak of male sexual arousal in the summer, normal gene-mixed variant offspring (or Vars) are conceived and are both male and female, but as most males are barred from female settlements only the favoured can mate. In the winter, the females become more aroused and have to persuade males who are uninterested at this time to mate. The product of such joinings are clones, who are genetically identical to their mothers. A male is still required, as male sperm, although not incorporated into the genetic makeup of the offspring, is necessary to "spark" the clones development. By this means, the society can still maintain a genetic diversity through the vars, but the female clones dominate the makeup of the population. These clones form into dynasties of specialised roles exploiting their abilities such as mechanics, weavers, diplomats and so on.

Into this background, Maia and her identical twin sister Lele (both vars but clones of each other), are sent into the world to find their

living in this society. Their task is essentially to find a niche in society and establish a new clan family. However, the peace of Stratos is disturbed by a visitor from the Phylum Worlds. The various political factions struggle to cope with the rediscovery of their world and the emissary Renna, and Maia finds herself in the middle of various plots and counterplots as she travels across the world. The story develops with various twists and turns, deceits and betrayals throughout this long book, but all of a sudden the story accelerates to what appears to be a rather hurried conclusion, leaving several unanswered plot strands, no doubt to be answered in a sequel.

Brin obviously has done a lot of work in the extrapolation of his initial premise, and wants to show off all this effort, but the characters fail to grip this readers attention. The story is one we have all seen before, in which the plot zig-zags across the surface of the planet, to introduce the various voices for and against this lifestyle, but because of the alien nature of the people I found little contact or sympathy for the characters, and at times real annoyance at some aspects of the naive plot devices used to generate artificial tension. In conclusion, I was disappointed because there could be a really good story built around this premise, but **Glory Season** isn't that book. 

### Robert Holdstock The Hollowing

*HarperCollins, 1993, 314pp, £15.99*

Reviewed by Paul Kincaid

**"H**is eyes remained closed but he knew the cathedral was not yet green, it was still in stark light, and the world was not yet quick."

So we enter Ryhope Wood once more. Robert Holdstock has been exploring this Tardis of primeval forest for a decade now. Of another time, and larger on the inside than it is outside, Ryhope Wood is in fact as large as our imagination. As such, it is theoretically unlimited, Holdstock could return for ever and a day to this quick and earthy womb of all our myths and tales.

Unfortunately, his route into this playground of dreams is, by now, well signposted. Someone from outside enters the wood on a quest, encounters a succession of ur-heroes and mythic archetypes, and reaches a climax which completes something both physical and spiritual for the protagonist. It is, perhaps inevitably, a route that is as archetypal as any figure met within the wood.


And the new novel is no exception, the broad story remains the same. Except that, for the first time, we begin in the dense green light of the forest. Instead of moving from

stark daylight into the dark and mysterious, here there are two levels of penetration. The familiar quest into the wood, and the less familiar penetration of mythagos into our realm.

This second and more significant penetration is suggested in a number of ways. Physically, the boundaries of Ryhope Wood are shifting, moving outward, engulfing what was previously on their edge. Spiritually, James Keeton stumbles naked from the wood after his failed quest to recover his daughter, Talis (from Lavondyss). He clutches only a wooden mask and appears to suffer a form of catatonia. Alex Bradley, a bright, imaginative 13-year-old with a particular interest in the story of Gawaine and the Green Knight, befriends Keeton and knows that Keeton is somehow able to glimpse his daughter through the eye-holes of the mask. At the moment of Keeton's death something comes through the mask to steal Alex's wits. Not long after, the brain-damaged boy disappears into the wood and is presumed dead.

Now the more familiar penetration occurs. Years later, Alex's father, Richard, is contacted by the motley band of researchers who have congregated around Alexander Lytton within the wood. Alex, he learns, is still alive, still 13, and feeding mythagos into the heart of the forest. But because he is brain-damaged, these mythagos are distorted, threatening the very nature of Ryhope Wood. Richard embarks on a dangerous quest to recover his son.

In fact, though we are told that Alex is distorting the natural mythagos, we don't actually see this. Those mythagos encountered by Richard seem no more rough and cruel than any we have seen before. Nevertheless, these encounters provide the incidental delights which have become familiar from the Mythago Wood sequence. In particular, here, a battle of wits between Richard and Jason which incidentally conflates Greek myth with the story of Babel and other legends. While the penetration of the wood into outside consciousness is vividly displayed in Richard's wild and primal courtship of the Amerindian researcher Helen.

**The Hollowing** is, in some ways, a curious book. There are moments, when Lytton theorises about the origins of the myth images, that the whole sequence has suddenly shifted from fantasy to science fiction. At other times the harshness of life within the wood seems to show up as feeble and anodine every other work of fantasy ever written. Yet in the end, whether it is fantasy or science fiction, and however much one may wonder if there are any further variations to be wrought on the basic quest format, it is clear that **The Hollowing** is Holdstock's richest and most skillful exercise in fiction to date. 

## R A MacAvoy Winter of the Wolf


Headline, 1993, 185pp, £16.99  
Reviewed by Barbara Davies

This sequel to *King of the Dead* renews acquaintance with Nazhuret of Sordaling. He is now a widower of fifty-five with an unmarried twenty-eight year old daughter, Nahvah, to worry about (though she's actually well able to take care of herself).

As in the previous book, *Winter of the Wolf* begins with an assassination attempt, and once more the political situation — this time it's the death of King Rudof of Velonya — seems but a pretext to set Nazhuret and his daughter travelling.

There is an eventful sea voyage and a sea serpent (but no battle with it as the book jacket implies, but the story concentrates on Nazhuret's solo ride to Velonya, and his encounters with the flamboyant Count of Dinaos. There is an unexplained mystical element throughout the book — Nazhuret sees visions of his dead wife, Arlin, and friend, Powl, not to mention a white wolf he recently killed: others see them too. There are also some subtly homoerotic scenes between Nazhuret and the Count. And all the time, the weather gets colder, and the snow deeper, until the reader starts to shiver in sympathy.

The book is narrated by Nazhuret, with a PS from his daughter, and MacAvoy uses a measured, formal style, which works well — except for one lapse where Nazhuret suddenly exclaims "bullshit"! The characters are expertly sketched, and the texture of the landscape is so real you can touch it. But the whole thing is too understated and short, as the author has concentrated on characterisation and atmosphere, and left the plot to fend for itself.

To sum up, *The Winter of the Wolf* did not overstay its welcome but rather left me frustratedly wishing the author had explained and expanded everything — particularly the relationship between the two men. 

## Phillip Mann Escape to the Wild Wood

Gollancz, 1993, 284pp, £15.99  
Reviewed by Ian Sales

Welcome to an alternate history.

But it is not an alternate history which you and I know... This alternate history "belongs in one of those parallel universes which exist, infinite in quantity, yet each in its own discrete time-shell, just slightly out of temporal phase with our own world and with each other".

Phillip Mann is making quite sure you know that *Escape to the Wild Wood* is an exercise in imagination. The book opens with an


authorial voice explaining that the world of this book, of this series — *Escape to the Wild Wood* is the first volume of *A Land Fit For Heroes* — is not our own. In the world of the book the Romans never left Britain, and went on to conquer the rest of the planet. Two thousand years later, the British Isles consists of cities of Romans and their vassals, and the wild woods — areas of untamed forest where the unconquered Brits live. The woodlanders are tolerated because they are primitive savages and pose no threat.

The story opens in the Battle Dome of Eburacum (York) where the cadets from the Marcus Aurelius Military Academy are putting on a combat display to show their mettle — as they do every year. These events are barbaric, and result in high body counts. But to the authorial voice this is normal, and nothing to be upset about. At the Battle Dome are the three main characters: military cadet Viti Ulysses, mechanic Angus Macnamara, and serving girl Miranda Duff. In a chapter entitled 'Three Tales', we learn the backgrounds of this trio, before moving on to the graduation combat at the Battle Dome the year following the events that open the book.

As a result of a series of events, Viti, Angus, and Miranda are forced to flee into the wildwoods. Of course, what they find is completely at odds with what they have been led to believe about the woodlanders. Far from being primitive savages, they are civilised peaceful folk, fully aware of what's happening in the Roman world, and perfectly happy to let the Romans underestimate them since that means they will leave them alone. The woodlanders are happy to receive the fugitives and teach them their ways. Unfortunately, the arrival of Viti, Angus, and Miranda (although especially Viti) has severe repercussions because the Romans won't rest until they are recaptured. And it is this story-line which forms the backbone of the latter half of the book and is carried on into the sequel, *Stand Alone Stan*.

Basing an alternate history around a single historical change and then extrapolating that to the present seems popular at present (cf *Aztec Century* by Christopher Evans and *A Dangerous Energy* by John Whitbourn). However, the further you drift from the cusp point, the harder it becomes to carry off the exercise. Mann succeeds — to a certain extent. I'm not sure about his Romans, but the woodlanders are interesting (even if they did remind me of Asterix). However, what can't be denied is that *Escape to the Wild Wood* is a good story, told extremely well. The intrusive authorial voice offers a perspective on the narrative as well as bringing the reader up to speed on the world of the book — used in

such a dual manner, this works better than most tries at the necessary infodumps.

I was impressed with *Escape to the Wild Wood* — enough to eagerly await the second book. 

## John Shirley Webtones

Blake, 1993, 332pp, £4.99  
Reviewed by Catie Cary


John Shirley has written some magnificent, intense fiction in the past; has shown himself to be a master of perceptual shift. It has been a source of regret to me that his work has not always seen UK publication. The back cover claims this to be "the cleverest, most chilling book since *Silence of the Lambs*...", "a work of genius from an extraordinary writer". Wow. It was with relish, therefore, that I set about reading it.

The narration is the expected hardboiled American thriller, spliced like a screenplay between a variety of locations and view points. The book opens as Tom Prentice, screenwriter, identifies the tortured body of his ex-wife in the LA Morgue. He suspects that the cops are hiding something about the manner of her death. Then we're looking through the eyes of Ephram Pixie (*Pixie?*), mystic astrologer and serial killer, as he chooses Constance for his next victim. Constance is a cute American teenager, much loved by her dad, who's a reverend and a drugs councillor. We are shortly introduced to more unpleasant Hollywood types, an array of pathetic victims, oh — and more serial killers — lots more serial killers. And vampiric astral parasites who feed on human pleasure and pain.

Viewpoints intercut as the story progresses, bodies pile up, tortures abound. The title, *Webtones* refers to a messy murder technique that leaves bodies open for identification. We are preached to on the subject of addition. It becomes clear that the parasitic Akishra, who look like B-Movie monsters from a clumsy metaphor, a warning writ large. Yes kids, on the basis of this story it is clear that drugs really do fuck you up. And so does sex. And Rock 'n' Roll.

Horror is the morality play of the '90s, and this is not necessarily a bad thing. Clive Barker has induced sympathy for the alien and monstrous; Thomas Harris plumbed the evil in us all. The successes of these two writers would seem to have provided the blueprint for this book. But the moral is tired, the victims are charmless and bland, white and black hats carved from the same thin but lurid cardboard. Nothing is learned.

There are occasional heartening flashes of good writing in this book, but it's hard to

believe Shirley wrote it with a straight face. It's not *bad* — it's mediocre, tedious, disappointing. 

## John Varley Steel Beach

HarperCollins, 1993, 480pp, £8.99 tpb  
Reviewed by Andy Lane


I'd like to be able to say that John Varley's **Steel Beach** is a marvellously written, stylish, inventive and beautifully characterised novel of ideas and action. I'd like to, but I can't. That's not because it's *not* marvellously blah blah: it's because it's *not* a novel. Not by my definition, at any rate.

**Steel Beach** is nominally a part of Varley's ongoing "eight planets" sequence which started with **The Ophiuchi Hotline**. The background idea is that humanity has been turfed off Earth by a politically correct race from a gas-giant planet who convert it for the exclusive use of dolphins and whales. Humanity takes up residence in the suburbs of the solar system and turns inwards, concerning itself with various sybaritic pursuits aided by nano-technology and omniscient computers. Varley rounds up the usual suspects — genetically re-engineered dinosaurs, altered body-shapes in response to fashion trends, cathartic arena bouts resulting in massive (but easily repairable) trauma to the fighters, the worship of showbiz idols (but thankfully not Elvis) — and throws them willy-nilly into the book whether or not they fit.

The details: Hildy Johnson is a reporter for the lunar tabloid **The News Nipple** (I kid you not). He is a bit taken aback to be told by the Central Computer (engagingly called the CC) that he has tried to kill himself on four occasions, and each time the CC has rescued him and wiped the memory from his mind. This is a flagrant breach of its programming, but it is worried. More and more lunar inhabitants are choosing to commit suicide. Worse still (all together now) the CC is feeling a bit depressed itself.

That's the set-up. The problem with the book is that there is no resolution. Our hero wanders around, has sex, changes sex, lives in a recreation of the old west for a while, sees two assassinations take place, builds a shack in the desert, burns it down, becomes a teacher, finds a group of eccentrics who live out on the moon's surface and becomes a neuter. After a while the CC tells him/her/it that everything is okay now. Er... that's it. There is no plot, just a series of events randomly strung together. Hildy does not connect with what would appear to be the theme, or contribute in any way to the resolution. With any other writer, that would be a crippling

flaw. Varley is so good, however, that the book is still immensely readable despite the complete mismatch between expectation and execution. The style he adopts — that old cyberpunk staple of a world-weary sub-Chandler first-person narration — has never been done better.

It's not often that one comes across a book so readable and yet so disappointing. It's almost worth writing to Varley and asking him to take another crack at it. 

## Joan D Vinge The Summer Queen

Pan, 1993, 1091pp, £9.99 tpb  
Reviewed by Sue Thomason

An immense sequel to "the Hugo award winning bestseller **The Snow Queen**", and related novel **World's End**, this book follows the changing fortunes of Tiamat, a world locked into a centuries-long cycle of exploitation and abandonment by the Hegemony, remnant of a long vanished Galactic Empire. Tiamat has alternately been dominated by the technology loving Winters (when the proximity to a black hole makes it an ideal nexus for interstellar travel) and the Goddess worshipping, close to nature, non-technological Summers (when the black hole's companion star blocks its use as a "gate").

At the end of **The Snow Queen** (an elaborated space opera version of the Andersen fairy tale), the decadent and despotic Winter Queen Arienrhod has been succeeded by her teenage clone, Moon Dawntreader Summer. Moon's one-time lover B Z Gundhalinu has left Tiamat without hope of returning in his lifetime, and Moon is partnered with her childhood sweetheart Sparks, fallen but repentant lover of Arienrhod. However in **World's End**, Gundhalinu rediscovers the Empire's long lost interspersal space drive, and in **Summer Queen** the drive is rehabilitated. This means that the technophiles can return to Tiamat mere years (instead of a century and a half) after leaving, to continue hunting mers, a decimated indigenous species whose blood is the basis of an anti-aging drug. The mers may be intelligent. They are also the biological basis of a (failing) telepathic information exchange system that underpins the Hegemony's continued existence. Only Moon knows this, and she can't tell. She's faced with two problems: develop a planet wide basis for appropriate technological development, *fast*, and develop an effective save-the-mers movement ditto, without being able to tell anyone why it's so important.

From here on, characters rush around all over the place doing all kinds of interesting stuff. **Summer Queen** doesn't have the tight


mythic structure of **Snow Queen** to hold it together, and it's about twice as long. It sprawls. Interlocking and opposing sets of Secret Societies and sub-plots get in the way of the main issue (can a clash of opposed/alternating cultures become a synthesis of the best of both?).

I have a number of criticisms of the book. Gundhalinu's native language has two second-person singular forms of address, one respectful, one intimate. They are represented by English "you" and "thou". "Thou" in English takes a distinctive verb ending: "thou lovest", "thou hast". Vinge apparently doesn't know this; she writes "I know how thou love them", or "Thou've done something to this room," (two examples from page 548). This grates.

There are some bigjumps in the timeline of the plot that seem to leave the characters concerned ten years older but otherwise unchanged, with just the same things on their minds.

The Secret Society stuff is said to have been going on during the events of **Snow Queen**. But it is not mentioned in **Snow Queen**, and I can't retrofit it onto the earlier book without some straining of my disbelief - suspending mechanism. It would have been easy enough to use a new viewpoint character to introduce the new material. (It would have been easier still to leave it out.)

Finally, I suspect that what's driving **Summer Queen** may be that Vinge has fallen in love with Gundhalinu and written him a happy ending, in which he turns into a cosmic hero and saves the universe five different ways from Sunday.

**The Summer Queen** disappointed me. Nevertheless, I recommend it to anyone who enjoyed the two earlier books. 


## Philip G Williamson Moonblood

Legend, 1993, 228pp, £8.99 tpb  
Reviewed by Andrew Seaman

On casual inspection the heart sinks. The stock fantasy map, replete with vaguely improbable names, a relentlessly hyperbolic back cover blurb and a bibliography citing such luminaries as Bettelheim, Campbell, Jung and Levi-Strauss do nothing to raise the reader's expectations. However, upon reading, **Moonblood** turns out to be something of a pleasant surprise.

Ronbas Dinbig, merchant and practising *Zan-hassin* shaman, arrives in the city of Ravenscrag intent on nothing more serious than a little profitable training and surreptitious womanising. A long-awaited heir is about to be born to the rulers of the citadel, the aged Lord Flarefist and his wife Lady Sheerquine, but soon after the birth the child, Redlock, is

transformed in his crib into a hideous monster and the couple's daughter, the fey teenager Lady Moonblood, disappears in mysterious circumstances. Blackmailed into investigating, Dinbig soon finds himself trapped in a web of intrigue involving an ancient legend and its associated curse which he must prevent from being fulfilled.

If this sounds familiar, it's probably because Williamson draws extensively upon fairy tale and myth to underpin the plot of his novel, paying particular attention to the rôle of women in these tales. In addition, the symbolic significance of certain events and the analysis of dreams, as well as Dinbig's shamanistic powers, all prove vital in unravelling the dark secret which haunts Ravenscrag. It's a catholic mix that could prove fatal, but fortunately for the reader, Williamson weaves these disparate elements together into a narrative which, if not as "breathtakingly exciting" as promised by the blurb, is entertaining and readable. He has an eye for descriptive detail and his characters (particularly the roguish, but principled, Dinbig and the tragic Lear-like figure of Lord Flarefest) are well-rounded, possessing a depth often lacking in novels of this sort. Low-key and personal in its approach *Moonblood* makes a welcome change from the usual run of High Fantasy trilogies crowding the bookshelves today. 

### Helen Windrath (Ed) The Women's Press Book of New Myth and Magic

Women's Press, 1993, £6.99  
Charlotte Watson Sherman  
One Dark Body

Women's Press, 1993, 209pp, £6.99  
Reviewed by Molly Brown

**The Women's Press Book of New Myth and Magic** is a mixed bag of treats, most of them delicious.

There's a lot of good, clever story-telling here. Margaret Elphinstone's 'Conditions of Employment' is the jolly tale of an unemployed woman who visits her local Job Centre and ends up as an all-purpose oracle, dispensing cures and prophecies from a furnished cave. 'Plane Story' by Elyse Guttenberg is fun, too; a woman on a long flight to California isn't happy about having to sit next to a crazy old lady whose pockets are crammed full of little carved dolls. Then the in-flight movie starts, and it's a series of scenes from the old lady's life.

Leigh Kennedy's 'Bats' is scary and funny and touching all at once. Jane Yolen's story of a young girl's coming of age is up to her usual high standard. Sara Maitland imagines what it must have been like to be married to one of

the Three Wise Men, Ellen Kushner's swash-buckling sword and sorcery yarn moves along at a cracking pace, and Jean Buffong writes sensuous prose of ghosts and mermaids in Grenada. But for me the stand-out of them all has to be 'Floating' by Charlotte Watson Sherman.

'Floating' is narrated by a twelve-year-old girl called Raisin and she is completely compelling. Abandoned at birth, she has been raised by a kindly childless couple, along with several other unwanted children, in the black section of a small Washington town surrounded by haunted woods where voices rise whispering from the ground and those who aren't careful can lose their souls — a kind of *Twin Peaks* meets *The Colour Purple*.

Raisin finds a sympathetic friend in Sin-Sin, a fatherless child rumoured to be the devil's own son because of the strange orange tint of his skin: "What colored folks you know walk around glowing like that?"

Sin-Sin is an outsider like her; she with her wrinkles and he with his glowing orange "shine". They build a shack in a secret place in the woods, where they meet to tell each other stories of the soul-snatching Night People, "tall as some of these trees, snake-haired and yellow-eyed", and Blue, the wanga-man, who "can turn himself into a snake or a lizard or a goat. Anything he want, he can change into."

'Floating' is a novel extract and comes to an abrupt halt just as Raisin freezes in the middle of the road, arms outstretched, voices calling to her from beneath the ground. If this is a marketing ploy, then it's a maddeningly effective one; I *had* to read the rest of the novel it was taken from, because I simply had to know what happened next. So I sat down to read *One Dark Body* and didn't get up again until I'd finished it.

In *One Dark Body*, we learn that Raisin is not alone in hearing voices. The mother who abandoned her at birth has been haunted for twelve years by Raisin's father, who dug his own grave then lay down and willed his spirit to walk away from his body. And now he wants his daughter to set his soul to rest. Blue the wanga-man has his own ghosts to deal with, as does Sin-Sin, who can see the past through an eye in the palm of his hand.

*One Dark Body* is not being marketed as a genre book, but it's brimming with mystery and magic, and written with undeniable, unputdownable passion. I loved it.



### Roger Zelazny A Night in the Lonesome October

Morrow/Avonova, 1993, 280pp, \$18.00  
Reviewed by Norman Beswick

**L**et me tell you at the outset: this story is told, in the first person, by a dog called Snuff.

No, don't go away. This is no ordinary dog: nothing cosy and domestic. Snuff is the familiar of Jack, a mysterious gentleman who roams the dark streets of late 19th century London carrying a knife and collecting ingredients for spells. Doing much the same thing are (among others) the mad monk, the witch, the horrid vicar, the Count, and the Good Doctor with his Experiment Man made out of bits of bodies.






It is the Game, and the dread night is approaching when the Elder Gods will be summoned back to the world. Snuff must keep track of the Players and calculate the Patterns, he makes contact with the familiars of each participant, including a cat, a snake (called Quicklime), an owl and a bat. In the intervals, he checks round the house to make sure the Things haven't escaped from the mirror, circle, wardrobe and trunk in which they are severally imprisoned.

Mysterious things happen, including murder, the arrival of the Great Detective and an American shape-shifter called Larry. Nothing is quite what it seems. Snuff (who is nobody's fool) recounts each October day's events to the climax on the 31st.

The book itself is a Game, a fanciful construction, taking a cluster of literary references and images and building an elegant entertainment. You won't know quite what's going on till the last page, and you may well be amused, though I was slightly disappointed with the climax. Twee it's not, though you could say it is comfortably horrid. The text is embellished throughout with excellent illustrations by Gahan Wilson.



### Rocket Rating Guide

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



# BARBED WIRE Kisses

Edited by  
Maureen Speller

In his first editorial for *Tomorrow Speculative Fiction*, Algis Budrys, editor and now publisher of the magazine, thanks to 'downscaling' at Pulphouse Publishing Inc, says he is looking for stories with a beginning, a middle and an end; unspoken is the corollary, 'and in that order too thank you.' With such a policy he is obviously aiming for the traditional conservative SF reader; and the covers say as much with their beautifully painted spaceships and strange, unidentifiable fantasy vessels, traditional accompaniments to older SF paperbacks. While it is clearly not going to offer much in the way of avant-garde surprise, *Tomorrow SF* does promise some good solid story-telling and, who knows, maybe even a few thought-provoking ideas as well.

But the reader is going to have to work for it. I almost put down issue 1 before I'd started it. The lead story, M Shayne Bell's 'Night Games', is competently written but no more than a banal story of coming-of-age for hunters in a fantasy world where ooh-nasties come out at night. Is this going to persuade me to part with \$4, or in the UK £3? The second story, Lionel Fenn's clumsily named 'The Alien Visitor, Probably from Someplace Else' certainly didn't have me reaching for the subscription form. It was a suitable title for a ponderous story which wasn't as funny as its author seemed to think. Paul Janvier's 'Starlight', a predictable 'oh my god, we've wiped out the whole human race' story meant three dogs in a row. What was going on? I have a lot of respect for Budrys as a critic yet it seemed that his critical faculties were out to lunch during the production of this magazine.

Virginia Baker's 'Pictures of Daniel', traditionally told but peripherally skiffy in a way I happen to like, did a lot to restore my faith in my hero-editor. A long, slow story, somewhat cluttered with technological processes to help detectives hunt a missing boy, it concentrates much more on the mother's progression through grief to the knowledge that her son is never coming home. The technology is interesting, but as is often true of this kind of story, it's the accumulation of small details which makes it work. Rapidly followed by Gene Wolfe's 'Useful Phrases', a story which catches the master at his most Borgesian, I began to feel hopeful. It's a short story but as is often the case with Wolfe, much is hidden in little. A bookseller who finds a strange phrase book becomes embroiled in what? The mind works over the possibilities again and again.

None of the other stories was less than competent, but more than once I was left thinking 'So?' The feeling has persisted through the other three issues I've so far read. Budrys hasn't deviated from his creed, and stories with beginnings, middles and ends are what we are given, only sometimes the endings are weak, and the middles don't hold up too well. Take Keith Brooke's 'Anthrocin' (Vol.1, no.4) as an example. A man decides to investigate his sister's death, discovers she'd downloaded her personality and sold the chip for insertion into an ape-like creature in the cause of experimentation. He rescues the personality chip; end of story. I was left with a whole bag of questions which clearly weren't going to be answered and a sense of having been cheated. And it's not only the newest writers who are guilty of this crime. Norman Spinrad's 'Vampire Junkies'

expands very little beyond the title. Bless the man, does he really think that that vampires getting high on the blood of drug addicts is new, startling material? Every piece he publishes is the occasion for debate and discussion' says the magazine. Yes indeed, but perhaps not in the way Budrys intended.

To give him his due, he does include material by new, previously unpublished writers, and this may prove to be the magazine's strength if he can maintain the policy and the quality of the fiction. At present, too much of it doesn't quite hit the spot. Sadly, Budrys' other habit, publishing stories by people who have dropped out of sight over the years, is yielding stories with threadbare images and ideas. Sometimes, their sheer ineptitude makes it embarrassing to read on. Nevertheless, this policy has yielded one gem, Avram Davidson's 'The Spook-Box of Theodore Delafont de Brooks'. Reading it, I was reminded of the reasons why Davidson spent his latter years in a degree of obscurity. His strange fantastical vision didn't suit the mechanistic approach of so much recent writing, and by extension readers' tastes. Their loss, I reckon. This was Davidson at his most entertaining, with a story which never quite makes sense, but which catches up the reader and involves her as it unfolds. I cut some of my genre teeth on Davidson's stories and it was a pleasure to be reminded of my roots.

On a less pleasant note, I am unhappy with the increasing amount of cleavage displayed in the illustrations, despite Budrys' assurance that he wants artwork which will make the reader want to read the story. I guess that tells us a lot about the sort of people he anticipates reading this magazine and it's obviously not thirty-something women. Nevertheless, if you can suspend the feminist scruples for a while, it's a magazine worth pursuing, though difficult to find in this country.

Even more difficult to find is *Science Fiction Age*, so much so that I have only seen Vol.1, no.2. The main criticism I've heard so far is the huge number of advertisements this magazine contains. Myself, I'd suggest that people look to the fiction which is, after all, the meat of the thing. Five stories in 74 pages, and none of them stick in the mind. Best written is Thomas Disch's 'A Family of the Post-Apocalypse', with its skewed view of post-apocalyptic America; that's post-apocalyptic in the biblical sense. It's amusing, and a story from Disch is always welcome, but I had a sense that he wasn't trying as hard as he might. Lawrence Watt-Evans didn't seem to be trying either. 'The Frog-Wizard' is another of his competent light fantasies but they're starting to seem samey. Is this the man who turned in 'Why I Left Harry's All-Night Hamburgers?'

We will draw a veil over Ronald Anthony Cross's 'Puss in Boots', a lumbering sexist comedy concerning a planet where men have trouble controlling the women in themselves. Truly, this story made me feel sick, as well as suggesting that **Tomorrow SF** is a paragon of anti-sexist virtue. My one glimpse of **Science Fiction Age** reminds me of a downmarket **Amazing**, with stories less carefully chosen, advertisements swamping the text and dictating its layout in a manner I didn't care for. However, it is unfair to judge one issue, out of context, and I'll be reviewing the magazine again once it starts arriving regularly.

Now, one magazine featuring traditional SF and fantasy is happenstance, two is coincidence but the arrival on the scene of a third suggests that something is going on, that there is a definite swing towards the more conservative brand of SF writing. I've suspected it for some time, having noted a trend towards rivet-counting SF novels, but now the editors are coming out and stating their intentions, none more so than **Expanse**, fresh from the States and to be carried by the NSFA in this country..

Editor Steven E Fick offers his own definition of SF, compounded of sense of wonder, the urge to explore and the need for new challenges, exhorting his readers to 'Go up, young man!' I guess I get to stay at home, baking cookies and having little spacemen. Yes, this magazine is so conservative in its outlook, it makes **SF Age** and **Tomorrow SF** look dangerously radical. Indeed, the letter column features a complaint against **SF Age** for publishing, shock, horror, a fantasy story, presumably that inoffensive little tale from Watt-Evans. This magazine is clearly not making much in the way of concession to the movement towards humanist SF and the re-defined science fantasy but it would be unfair to reject it before considering the contents, particularly not when it includes a fine story by Mark Rich, which both acknowledges and subverts the pulp sensibilities which seem to fuel this magazine. 'Of Cars, His Tower' is set in a post-disaster desert landscape, of the kind beloved of Ballard in his **Vermilion Sands** phase. Nagdon has befriended the strange spherical creatures which inhabit the place and which are building him, so he believes, a tower made of fossilised cars. It's a delicate study of truth and motive set against concerns about individuality and communality and would be a good story by any standards. In **Expanse**, it is head and shoulders above the rest, distinguished by the strength of the writing and by the characterisation.

Something similar might be said about S C Lofton's 'Anthropic Conversations with

Jersey', except that the sentimental ending mars a delightful philosophical conversation between man and mutant miniature giraffe. Or is it just that the giraffe is so damn attractive? Otherwise, the stories are reworkings of themes I recall from childhood SF reading: tales of landing on asteroids littered with artifacts which reveal they were once part of Earth, or tales of derring-do in which boy-heroes save the experienced Mars hands from certain death (And we'll overlook the fact that the clumsy spaceman is a spacewoman). None of this is startling original.

However, where **Expanse** wins hands down is in production values. The interior production values are fabulous. The cover sports the usual full colour reproduction of planets and galaxies but inside we're in realms which come closer to our own **BBR**. The bulk of the black and white artwork is by Alfred Klosterman and Allen Koszowski, and with a magazine in that squat, not quite A4 format, with text over two columns, the illustrations have a chance to shine. Fick and his production team have really pulled out the stops on this one and it is clear that they really care about the look of their magazine. As for the fiction, it's too early to judge. **Expanse** is to be produced quarterly, and I am curious to see what path it takes in future issues.

If the Stateside trend seems to be towards conservative old-style SF, what about the UK small press magazines? If the trend in the professional magazines is towards the traditional, will the small press become the last bastion of experimentation? I'm talking about content as much as style, and the keyword with the titles I'm looking at is 'eclecticism'.

**Auguries** is one of the longest-running small press magazines in this country. Its editor, Nik Morton, favours shorter stories, which is not a bad thing in itself but leads to an impression of overcrowding in the magazine, and a sense that some of the stories might have been developed at greater length. Often it feels as though ideas are chopped off before they've begun. Sometimes this works to the story's benefit, as in Iain Layden's 'On the Bridge', as the reader is left to contemplate a generations-long stalemate between aliens and humans but, as often, it works against the story, as with Andy Parratt's 'Window of Life', which left me wondering what the point had been in recounting a child's memories of its illness and death. Or else, the idea is so hackneyed, it can't possibly be saved, as in Stephen J Wood's 'A Pleasure Multiplied'. From the moment the narrator sets off for a remote island in search of an answer to a certain mystery, you know he isn't coming back so what is the point of continuing the

story? 'Trenches' by Steven J Blyth and P Andrew Miller's 'The Crazy Quilt' coincidentally both deal with the impulse to survive in whatever way presents itself, and for some reason these two stories stick in my mind.

**Strange Attractor** is still fairly fresh out of the slips, on its third issue but already attracting a lot of attention and praise. This is the first issue I've seen so I've nothing to compare it with, but all the same, I wonder slightly about this fuss. My sense of issue 3 is that it is slightly unfocused. Rick Cadger presents it as a magazine dealing with horror, fantasy and slipstream, kicking off with a story about cannibalism, David Logan's 'The People Upstairs'. Cannibalism is undoubtedly a controversial topic but not handled like this. To have a woman who has stopped eating, disgusted by the sheer grossness of her husband, suddenly shift to participating in cannibal feasts stretched my imagination further than it was prepared to go, it was implausible, and too much of the story was taken up with endless to-ing and fro-ing on the stairs.

Tanya Brown's 'Laurel in the Rain' was, by contrast, a more coherent, sustained effort. As her narrator concludes 'I guess I don't know anything', which is entirely true but one is at least certain of that ignorance, as part of the fictive process, whereas the bemusement generated by Logan results from a story which doesn't know what it's doing. Andrew McEwan's 'The Holes in the Air' also stumbles at the final hurdle. For sheer ambiguity, however, it would be hard to beat P J L Hinder's 'Her Ghosts'. A new and surprisingly absorbing twist on the old idea of the meeting between the two last people on Earth, this is a dialogue of incomprehension. What does the woman see, what does the man see? How can the reader make sense of these two perceptions of a situation? Are the 'ghosts' the projections of a lonely woman, or do they really exist? Well-written, well presented, this was the star story in this issue.

To say that **Strange Attractor** is a worthy effort is to damn it with faint praise, which is not my intention. Some of the stories I liked a great deal, and I applaud Rick Cadger's decision to concentrate on fiction. I'll even tolerate the experiments with typesetting and layout, though some are more successful than others, and I'll try not to wince at the misuse of apostrophes, not to mention various misspellings. Nevertheless, I feel that Cadger hasn't yet decided exactly what he is doing with the magazine. However, he has energy and enthusiasm which count for a lot in the small press game, and I feel sure he is going to surprise us.

**Albedo One** is new, emerging from the thriving SF scene in Dublin. So far, it seems to be all things to all people, mixing stories with interviews and book reviews and a feature on, of all people, Philip K Dick, as though the world needed another article on one of its most over-researched authors. Of the stories I most liked John Kenny's 'The Stairway', even though I would have liked it to engage more fully with the core dilemma, whether or not to climb the mysterious stairway which has appeared as the world is threatened by inter-continental war. Too often in a story like this, the *deus ex machina* is embraced wholeheartedly, as the means of salvation, without anyone stopping to question what's going on. In this instance the protagonist pauses for thought but I'm still waiting for the philosophical justification.

I'm still waiting for the physics behind Jim Steel's 'Goodbye Runt', but I'm none too keen on arguing with his characters, nor indeed going for too many rereads, just in case. Steel works from the premise that fictional characters take on a reality of sorts if enough people read them, which is how you have four GIs blundering around in a near-future city which looks a lot like London. It's taut, tricky stuff. As one GI observes 'I know I'm real' but is he? What's the reader to believe? If **Albedo One** can keep up to, and transcend, this level of material then we have hope of injecting new ideas into the genre.

**Exuberance** is a title that promises much. To me, it speaks of soaring flights of fancy, of *joie de vivre*, a delight in the endless possibilities of the imagination. Paul Beardsley's 'Versions', in **Exuberance** 6, certainly lives up to this promise. Beardsley confidently negotiates his way through the shifting perspectives of a time-travel story with a difference. His protagonist constantly makes over his life, righting wrongs, sorting out his own injustices, but ultimately, what is left to him, what is real? It was, however, unwise to schedule Roderick MacDonald's 'Phantom Pain' against 'Versions'. There are too many similarities in the central notion, and MacDonald does not exhibit the same control of his subject matter. At times his plotting seems muddled and one loses sight of the characters' motives. By contrast, Elliott Smith's 'Traffic', beautifully illustrated by Dreyfus, is perhaps the ultimate motoring horror story, as the endless traffic jam crawls slowly on to a Promised Land which may not even exist, and where all is dependent on the whim of the Gasman. It's a disconcerting story, not easily assimilated in one read, and a stark vision of the future.

**Scheherazade** 7 is another slim volume and has received some criticism on this account. The editors reject this criticism, saying that they will publish more material when they can afford to, in which case let us hope it is soon. I'm quoted in this issue as wishing that fictionazines would get on with publishing fiction, a comment prompted by an interview in an earlier issue which, I felt, gave us too much of the interviewer and not enough of the interviewee. In the latest interview, with Philip Mann, I still feel we hear too much about what Mann said, without him being quoted, but the balance is improving. Yet I ponder the need for this interview when the space might be better occupied with another story, in the same way as I wonder if Phil Emery's very slight tale, a half page of words, needed another one and a half pages of production to go with it. Nevertheless, an interview with Philip Mann is a rarity over here so I should probably be more generous. The highlight of this issue is David Redd's 'The Wounded Dragon', originally written to be read at Mabinogion, in honour of the Mabinogion itself, that repository of ancient Welsh storytelling. For those familiar with Redd's spiky humorous tales, this is a little different, drawing heavily on the Welsh story cycles and on the Matter of Britain itself, and told in the same sonorous prose. Try reading it aloud. Sandra Unerman's Helgi Halldanarson draws on another ancient storytelling tradition, that of the Norse sagas, in her story of Helgi's encounter with a supernatural being. If

**Scheherazade** is criticised for being slight, I think it is a criticism born of frustration that there isn't more. Outlets for fantasy writing in the traditional sense are few and **Scheherazade** does a brave job in the face of the move towards conservative SF.

**Works** is the home of 'mood fiction', a style which sometimes seems to excuse the need for a plot. Mood is a personal thing. In writing to evoke a feeling, an emotion, a writer must work with more precision than might be imagined. Even then, there is no guarantee of success, for no two readers possess the same psyche, and that which delights one can easily annoy another. It's even more of a problem for a critic who has to respond and yet remain aloof. How much can personal taste enter into the equation?

Issue 9 of this popular magazine contains the usual array of material, some of which leaves me cold, although well written. Mike O'Driscoll's 'The Tailgater' epitomises that which I like about 'mood fiction', the sense that something is going on, but what the hell it might be, your guess is as good as mine. A man drives endlessly through the country

looking for a place which may or may not exist, and there is someone or something on his tail. If you drive, and if you've ever acquired your own tailgater, you appreciate what O'Driscoll is talking about. Indeed, the hunt for Quallam is almost an abstraction which belongs to another story. Likewise, D J Hughes' 'Flight Time' touches on that most basic of fears for the unhappy traveller, the fear of flying. Who are we to assume that because we are in a new and wonderful age of technopromise that such fundamental phobias have disappeared.

What mars **Works** however is a lack of care and attention, not to layout or illustration, which is among the best I've seen in this batch of small press magazines, but to the English language. I am more sensitive than most to this, earning my living as a proofreader, but the fact remains that spelling mistakes in *titles* just aren't on. I shan't reiterate a previous comment about apostrophes. It may seem like no big deal but I am intensely irritated by misspellings, by the poor use of punctuation, by a lack of copy-editing and proofreading. To be a good editor, a person has to do more than just copy-type the stories. Authors aren't infallible. True, neither are editors, but there is a difference between fallibility and carelessness. If small press editors want to be taken seriously, they have to work to the highest professional standards in choice of material, in layout and in editing. Otherwise they do no favours to themselves, to their authors or to those who come after, looking for a standard against which to measure their own efforts.

Lastly, a different perspective on another relative newcomer to the small press scene

## The Lyre 2 Reviewed by Steve Jeffery

The **Lyre**'s second issue arrives after the sort of long gap between issues that has plagued several other small press magazines. Only the small, the quick and the grant-assisted seem able to weather this problem.

Ian Sales, in his editorial, says: "I'd like to see fiction that's pushing the envelope." So why does much of the fiction here read like 1970s **Analog**? Even in their opening sentences, stories such as 'White Loci Peak' by Peter F. Hamilton and 'To Put Aside Childish Things' by Angus McAllister are overloaded with juvenile skiffy futurity.

The stories are not as bad as they appear at first sight, but they can hardly be described as the cutting edge. Gwyneth Jones's 'The Universe of Things' has an unsettling (for the garage mechanic protagonist, anyway) perceptual shift in the middle, but is a



somewhat sentimental tale about exotic aliens among us. 'White Loci Peak', stripped of its SFnal trappings, might be some heroic hang-gliding yarn.

Of the other stories, 'Le Jour Se Leve' by Peter T Garrett tells of a conflict between Catholicism and Christian fundamentalists, where the fundamentalist baddies get suitably fried at the end, just before God's tears put out the heretic witch's pyre. Yuk. Craig Marnock's 'The Music Lover' is little more than a short piece of soft techno porn about a sad kid who jerks off through his hi-fi; neither an erotic nor a particularly amusing conceit. And there is a long poem, 'Were You In C.J. Cherryh's Bar That Marvellous Night?', by Steve Sneyd, which I couldn't really come to grips with.

**W**e are left with the non fiction: a number of short reviews; an interview with Graham Joyce by Ian Sales which is pretty good though it dates from Mexican 4, over two years ago; and a couple of drabbles.

The layout is clear if a little uninspiring. At least it avoids **REM's** typographical lapses into illegibility, though the interior artwork is pretty much at the bottom end of the **Interzone** scale only Kevin Cullen's name is familiar, and that on a small editorial filler. The artwork does little, if anything, to enhance or complement the text, and a couple of pieces seem to have very little to do with the stories they illustrate. Artwork needs to catch your attention, to draw you to a story you might otherwise skip as you flick through the pages: most of these seem curiously apologetic rather than attention grabbing.

**T**o quote again from Ian Sales's editorial: "the SF genre is an odd beast." The same might be said of **The Lyre**. It seems to have no particular direction at the moment, with a selection of what can best be described as workmanlike stories that sit in the middle ground of the SF genre.

### Addresses

**The Lyre** £2.25, £6/3 issues: 275 Lonsdale Ave., Intake, Doncaster, S. Yorks DN2 8HU

**Albedo One**, £1.75, £7/4 issues: 2 Post Road, Lusk, Co. Dublin, Ireland

**Agurries**, £2.00, £8/4 issues: 48 Anglesey Road, Alverstoke, Gosport Hants PO12 2EQ

**Exuberance**, £1.95, £7/4 issues: 34 Croft Close, Chipperfield, Herts WD4 9PA

**Scheherazade**, £1.99 £7.50/4 issues: St Ives, Maypole Road, East Grinstead, West Sussex RH19 1HL

**Strange Attractor** £2.00, £7.75/4 issues: 111 Sundon Road, Houghton Regis, Beds, LU5 5NL

**Works** £2.00 £7.50/4 issues: 12 Blakestones Road, Slaffwaite, Huddersfield, HD7 5U

# Going to NOVACON?

*Oh CATIE, I'm sure we could reach such a lot of new members at NOVACON, if only we had help to man a desk... Who can we turn to help us?*

*Well MAUREEN, I've got an idea... Why don't we ask the READERS to help? I'm sure they would be WILLING.*



*An hour or so of your time could make a big difference to us.*

*What's more helping us can be fun and is a great way of meeting people. Full instructions will be given, and you won't be left on your own...*

*So please contact Maureen and volunteer your services, you'll find her address inside the front cover of this magazine*

# Paperback *Grabfite*

Edited by Stephen Payne

## Signposts

**Brian Hodge  
Nightlife**

"...there are no clear-cut good guys or bad guys, just people who have to be responsible for their own actions...This fundamental human reality is the backbone of *Nightlife*, the source of its strength, excitement and readability."  
Martin Sutherland

**Ken Kesey  
Sailor Song**

"This is a better novel than almost anything you are likely to read this year. So what if it isn't 'real' SF... shame on you if you care."  
Martyn Taylor

**Ursula Le Guin  
Always Coming Home**

"... changed my life. It gives me a place from which to evaluate the cultures among which I live. It gives me something to aim at: the practice of peace, wholeness and sustainability."  
Sue Thomason

**Walter M. Miller  
A Canticle for Leibowitz**

"This new edition has an inaccurately numbered contents page and on page 18 two Yiddish symbols are missing. Never mind; buy it."  
Norman Beswick

**Tim Powers  
The Stress of Her Regard**

"This book is both a fascinating display of ideas and an example of the skillful interweaving of the real and the possible."  
Susan Badham

## Reviews

**Pauline Ashwell  
Unwillingly to Earth**

*Tor*, 1992, 280pp, \$2.80  
Reviewed by Jon Wallace

This is a novel of a kind I thought had vanished. A teenage girl, plucky and courageous (and naive) takes on all comers and wins! This is the stuff that I was brought up on! 'He takes a deep breath and says, 'I think we ought to try to find the real Culprit ourselves.'"

An unlikely sequence of events finds Lizzie Lee staying in an inn while her father recovers in hospital from an accident. Her handling of events brings her to the attention of M'Clare of the Russet Interplanetary College of Humanities, Department of Cultural Engineering. This contact leads to Higher Things (and Education)... "Dad starts to go red and I say 'Look, two minutes gone already, what did you want to tell me? Say it straight', and he says 'Going to send you to College, girl'"

This is an old-fashioned book, Lizzie Lee reminds me of George, of Enid Blyton's Famous Five. A no-nonsense girl who won't be cowed by anyone or anything. The situations that she finds herself in are the same "if no adults can sort this out then I'll bally well do it!" things that Enid Blyton excelled at. If books like this still need to be written, then this one is reasonable, but you'd have to be teenage (and naive) to identify with Lizzie Lee... "This may come as a surprise, that I am a girl, I mean. My tutor at Prelim School says my speech is feminine as spoken, but written down looks like the kind of male character who spits sideways."

**Isaac Asimov  
& Robert Silverberg  
Child of Time**

*Pan*, 1992, £4.99  
**Positronic Man**  
*Pan*, 1993, £8.99

Reviewed by Martin Brice

In *Child of Time*, a little boy is snatched up by a time-scoop and dumped in a futuristic laboratory 40,000 years later. For technical reasons he cannot go outside, so he has to be nurtured, examined, studied, experimented on and displayed to the media, all within that scientific environment.

The *Positronic Man* begins some time beyond 'the long anguish that was the 20th century'. The mathematical logic which guides this human-shaped domestic robot, allows it to make choices in situation where the Three Laws of Robotics contradict each other. Reasons and decision stored in memory, the robot is enabled to make further, more difficult, choices in the future, which become progressively influenced by so many memorised factors, that decisions eventually seem the result of illogical emotion. And so NDR-113 becomes Andrew Martin in more than name.

Both books are intrinsically simple narratives, based on earlier Asimov short stories ('The Ugly Little Boy' and 'The Bicentennial Man'). The present dual authorship reads as true collaboration, together spinning each thread, together weaving two great stories.

There are many threads in these two novels: the responsibilities of research; the rights of the past, the present and yet unborn, remedial teaching; media ethics; child abuse; codes of business conduct; the duties of privileged ownership. They are thus timely reads for BSFA members, coinciding with recent articles in *Focus*. In Issue 24, several contributors discussed characteristics. Well, these two books are peopled by characters: Andrew Martin; Miss Fellowes; Timmy; Sir; Little Miss; She Who Knows; human or android, present or prehistoric, you don't get any of them confused. Brian Stableford's theme in *Focus* 24 was that fantastic fictions should reflect and examine the moral dilemmas of present-day life. Both these novels ask how we can define 'alien' and if we can ever owe such any moral consideration.

Robots are artificial creations, so how can we regard Andrew Martin as anything other than a clever artefact? Yet as I read this book I can't help thinking that we 20th century humans say that houses have 'character'; indeed sometimes we consider their well-being more important than the welfare of the humans therein. Conversely, the praise for robot artist-ry is no different from the amazement shown

at the achievements of slaves and working-class freemen. A century ago, there was serious debate on whether slaves had souls and whether the labouring classes could feel and think the same as their 'superiors'. The word 'robot' originally meant forced labour and then a *living* being who acts without will.

In **Child of Time** we are asked if a Neanderthal who has all our human powers and persona, is any less a human because he looks different from us. It is easy for us to condemn and guard against the prejudices portrayed in this book, the prejudices of race, sex and disability. As I read, I wondered if all such prejudices begin by despising our fellow citizens for being 'twitchees', 'grockles', 'rat-runners' or any other comical, if threatening, terms of abuse. The original definition of the word 'alien' was someone who was a stranger to our family or parish.

I recommend these two books to anyone who is interested in science, anyone interested in humanity, anyone who wants a good read and to anyone who just wants to *think*.

### Robin Bailey Straight on Til Mourning Volume II of The Brothers of The Dragon

NEL, 1993, 280pp, £4.99

Reviewed by Andrew Seaman

**S**traight on Til Mourning shuffles the deck of fantasy clichés with no great originality and to little effect, as twins and martial arts experts Eric and Robert Podlowsky and their friend, Katy Dowd, travel from Hicksville, U.S.A. to the alternate world of Palenoc, to join a thousand year old war against an evil sorceress.

Sounds familiar? Standard fantasy elements cribbed from authors too numerous to mention (e.g. dragon riders telepathically attuned to their mounts) are pressed into service alongside a disheartening amount of cheap mysticism involving crystals and spirits, lending a nauseating veneer of New Age philosophy to the proceedings. For someone who has an M.A. in Literature, Bailey's writing is at best pedestrian and more often downright embarrassing, congested with an interminable style and patches of decidedly purple prose.

Why NEL are backing losers like this is a mystery. The depressing conclusion must be that formulaic comfort fiction of this kind sells.

### C. J. Cherryh Hellburner

NEL, 1993, 359pp, £4.99

Reviewed by Julie Atkin

**N**ot having read Cherryh's Merchanters Universe novels, I was apprehensive about

dropping into the sequence mid-way. In her introduction, Cherryh says there is no need to follow the series in order, but I would recommend that readers first read **Heavy Time**, to which this is the sequel.

Ben Pollard, ex-miner made good, is awaiting interview for a longed-for posting to Earth, when he is ordered to Fleet Strategic Ops HQ. Paul Dekker, an old mining colleague and now a test pilot on the secret Hellburner plane, has been dragged from the flight simulator and hospitalised. Pollard is sent to get the facts from the semiconscious Dekker, and is manipulated by the conspiracies and machinations taking place between the Fleet, United Defense Command and the Earth Company.

Despite my unfamiliarity with the politics and geography, I found the major characters and the plot involving. The pace is fast, there is plenty of action and the main characters are well drawn — although some of the supporting players appear slightly one-dimensional. An excellent read for lovers of hard SF.

### C. J. Cherryh The Goblin Mirror

Legend, 1993, 331pp, £4.99

Reviewed by Mat Coward

**S**ince this is an 'orses and omens fantasy tale, you don't really need me to tell you the plot; some brave young nobles ride out overmountain, seeking the counsel of a great witch, to save their kingdom from an evil fate.

They've not been at it long before they're ambushed and discover that the Goblins have declared war. The witch cannot be found, the heroes are scattered and wounded and their neighbouring kingdoms have fallen to the invaders. Their only hope lies in using a magical thingummy, a shard of the Goblin Queen's own mirror, which is so unpredictably powerful that no-one in his right mind would touch it.

It's a wordy book, full of what I call padding, but which a more committed fantasy fan might recognise as atmosphere and characterisation. The mixture of Russian names, olde worlde phrasing and Americanisms like "Where do you get the right to shout at me?" grate a bit. The first 100 pages are slow, but it all lives up nicely once the Goblins get going properly: "It's nails were dark and long, on hands as beautiful as a woman's, as expressive, as graceful in ironic gesture" — an ironic Goblin is worth £4.99 of anyone's money.

### Louise Cooper The Deceiver

Grafton, 1993, 280pp, £4.99

Reviewed by Ian Sales

**W**hat differentiates a good fantasy novel

from an ordinary fantasy novel? According to popular wisdom there are a number of signs: the word 'trilogy' or 'series' on the cover; a plot neatly wrapped up with a 'titanic' battle where the forces of good triumph; two non-human races such as elves, dwarves, etc.; magical colleges and sorcerous orders; religions fixated on a particular number; the cast includes human and non-human denizens, assorted gods, demons and other semi-omnipotent beings. Maps, character lists and family trees are also good indicators.

**The Deceiver** scores quite highly on this scale. The words 'The Chaos Gate Trilogy 1' on the cover are merely the beginning. (And since **The Deceiver** is the first of the trilogy, there's no telling if the final book will finish with the obligatory battle.) There is a magical order, a religion based around the number 7 and half the action takes place in realms of the gods of Chaos and Order.

On the plus side, there's no maps or family trees and the characters are 100% human.

The world of **The Deceiver** is ruled by a triumvirate: the High Initiate of a magical order, the Matriarch of a healing and teaching sisterhood and the High Margrave, head honcho of the rulers of the provinces. 60 years before the time the book is set, there was a big battle between the forces of Chaos and Order which ended in the Equilibrium. The 7 gods of each side have vowed never to meddle in human affairs unless asked, providing they are worshipped equally.

When the High Initiate responsible for winning the Equilibrium dies, a young girl in the charge of Matriarch Ria Morys dies in childbirth. The baby, a girl called Ygorla, survives and is taken in by the sisterhood. However on her 14th birthday (mystical number 7), she discovers that her father is a Chaos Demon and her destiny is to rule the world (why aim low, eh?). The demon takes her to the site of the battle to learn the extent of her powers.

Life continues for the rest of the world. We see a number of minor events through the eyes of uninteresting characters, one of whom has not forgotten the disappearance of Ygorla — despite the official line that she is dead. Hal. How little they know...

The narrative leaps years in a single bound, trying desperately to get from Ygorla's birth to her coming of age at 21 (mystical number 7, again) in one book — in order to set the scene for book 2, no doubt. The writing is competent, although favoured expressions and phrases appear with alarming regularity.

Having noted the title of the trilogy to which **The Deceiver** is the first part, I'm tempted to posit the existence of a fantasy conspiracy: 'Fantasygate'. Editors of English Language publishing houses across the world

flood the market with bland, derivative fantasy novels in an effort to erode the critical faculties of readers and so make it easier for the publishers to earn vast profits from low-grade, low-cost material. The circumstantial evidence seems to support this...

### Louise Cooper The Pretender

HarperCollins, 1993, 377pp, £4.99

Reviewed by Lynne Bispham

Epic fantasy often features a villain of the "Dark Lord" type, hell-bent on conquering the world or destroying it. In this book, the second volume of the Chaos Gate trilogy, it is demon's daughter, Ygorla, who has embarked on world domination. **The Pretender** is a more subtle and unconventional work than the scenario of the opening chapter might suggest. The half-human sorceress Ygorla and her demon father are evil, but the central conflict in the book is not simply between good and evil, but between order and chaos. With Ygorla's father in possession of the soul-stone of a Chaos god, the balance between Order and Chaos is threatened. When Strann, a musician forced into Ygorla's service, calls on Yandros, Lord of Chaos, for help, the god entrusts him with a message to the adepts of the Circle who oppose Ygorla. However, the High Initiate of the Circle, believing Ygorla to be an agent of Chaos, have already called upon the Lords of Order and they have answered. Only the High Initiate's sister, mistrusting Order's motives, believes that the Equilibrium must be maintained.

It is tempting to equate Order and Chaos with good and evil, but their natures are more ambiguous. Ailind, a Lord of Order is arrogant and pompous, Yandros is far more congenial, yet both will only interfere in human affairs when it is to their own advantage. The interaction of supernatural beings with well drawn human characters is ably handled to make this a convincing and enjoyable read. **The Pretender** is not a self-contained novel, but on the evidence of this middle volume, the Chaos Gate in its entirety will be a welcome addition to the fantasy genre.

### David Day The Tolkien Companion

Mandarin, 1993, 271, £5.99

Reviewed by Steve Palmer

As I ponder the ever-lengthening list of books posthumously published by Tolkien's estate, I wonder if there is room for another encyclopaedic guide to Middle Earth. As this time is culled in part from **The Tolkien Bestiary** and **The Tolkien Encyclopaedia**, both written by

David Day. I fear the answer is no. This book will sell, but will add nothing to the amorphous mass of Tolkien literature.

Covering the same ground as Robert Foster's **Complete Guide to Middle Earth**, this latest permutation of Tolkien's world — a guide for those who don't need a guide — is nicely produced, copiously illustrated (though with pictures filched from **The Bestiary**), but it is a book to dip into for half an hour, then return to the shelf next to volume 9 of **The History of Middle Earth**.

The books deals fairly with all aspect of Middle Earth, with no perceptible bias toward any age or aspect. For the completist or those hypnotised by Tolkien culture it might be an attractive volume, cheap, easy to read and well presented. But it is a shame that no more original way of organising the book could be found than alphabetically; it would be a welcome change to find a book arranged, for example, in chronological order; or by subject.

**The Tolkien Companion** treads old ground in an old way with old illustrations. The books lacks the charm of **Journeys of Frodo** and lacks the range of the **Bestiary**. As another reviewer remarked this is J. R. R. Posthumouslaundrylists.

### Philip José Farmer Red Orc's Rage

Grafton, 1993, 282pp, £4.99

Reviewed by Andy Mills

In the years 1965 to 1977 Farmer produced the **World of Tiers**, a series of five books set in the "pocket universes" of violent, immortal Lords. Apparently — though I find it hard to believe — this series was utilised by a psychiatrist as the basis for the treatment of disturbed adolescents. Red Orc's Rage is the fictionalisation of this therapeutic process — art imitating life imitating art, as it were.

Jim Grimson is a seventeen year old growing up in a decaying industrial town. Jim's unemployed, drunken father hates him; the feeling is mutual. Despite his intelligence, Jim is struggling at school and his social relationships aren't that hot. Stumbling from one catastrophe to the other, events come to a head when Jim burns down the family house following a fight with his father.

Placed in a psychiatric unit the youngest is introduced to Dr Porsena's experimental "Tiersian" therapy. Jim has to read the **World of Tiers** series, select a character and enter his universe. (Choosing the Tiersian Lords — an unpleasant bunch with few redeeming features — as character models for psychiatric treatment seems dodgy at best). Jim picks Red Orc, a Lord who — like Jim — hates his father and spends much time enraged. He

then has to "adopt all the mental and emotional characteristics of the role model whether they're good or bad." The next stage is to expunge the bad qualities of the character, leaving Jim with the positive as part of himself.

The novel oscillates between the real world and Jim's forays into the Tiersian universes, where he is a passenger in Red Orc's mind.

This is a curious book. Although the mundane parts are often grippingly realistic, the whole gives the impression of being hurriedly written. Nevertheless, it provided an entertaining Sunday afternoon read.

### David Gerrold Star Trek Adventures: The Galactic Whirlpool

Titan, 1993, 223pp, £3.99

Reviewed by Benedict S. Cullum

This constitutes the first UK publication in a series of new adventures featuring the Star Trek crew: Uhura, Bones, Spock, Kirk, *et al*. Apart from the large potential profit for the Trade Mark holders — the writers generally receive a fee and no percentage — the purpose in such "share-cropping" of TV series might be summarised as allowing fans to boldly visit new places in familiar company or for the writer to extend the boundaries further than was possible in the visual medium...

A search for a Klingon battle cruiser is interrupted in order to investigate an anomalous presence. Then ensues the tale of how Kirk & Co handle the discovery of the missing Wanderer, Earth's first generation starship, now with failing life-support systems, warring "crew" and heading for destruction in the turmoil of two black holes.

A scriptwriter for the original series, Gerrold is aware of the pitfalls and clichés, pointing out at one stage that Spock and McCoy's mutual sniping is the only way they could express their mutual respect for one another. He also has one character observe that whenever the situation calls for discussion of Prime Directive implications, Kirk ends up breaking the rules anyway!

This book examines the internal complexities both of *The Enterprise* and its crew, which the TV series tended to gloss over.

### Charles L. Grant Raven

NEL, 1993, 214pp, £4.99

Reviewed by Jon Wallace

**Raven** opens as a dark psychological thriller, set in the claustrophobic confines of a snowed-in out of town restaurant in New York State. The characters seem the stock kind of people that populate disaster movies — the

loony cook, the young punk and his girl friend, the beautiful bartender, the yuppies out for a new experience, the drunken gambler and, of course the ex-cop owner of the restaurant. The situation too is stock. A lone nut gunman fires on anyone who leaves the restaurant, killing one man and trapping the rest inside. Meanwhile, the snow falls steadily and the passing traffic slows and stops... "The sander passed, and passed on, swirls of dry snow in its wake, lifting in a haze and settling again despite the wind. He waited to see a car, just to be sure. Instead he saw a man."

These routine characters and events could so easily have been, well, routine, but Grant has a deftness of touch that gives the people character and the events tension.

As the events unfold and the characters realise that the gunman is not just another nut, as their fear develops and starts to drive their actions, we keep turning the pages to see what is going to happen.

In this novel, Grant again explores the theme of a dark, unknowable evil, that he examined in his previous novels, **Stunts** and **Something Stirs**, but this time the story is told with just the correct quantities of known and unknown, the events lead naturally to the conclusion. This time Grant has it just right.

### Simon Green **Blood and Honour**

Gollancz, 1993, 316pp, £4.99

Reviewed by Chris Hart

Simon Green is a novelty amongst contemporary fantasy authors as he is able to elicit favourable reviews from normally cynical reviewers in the genre press. His success can be partly attributed to the sense that Green is at ease with the conventions of the genre and his enjoyment rubs off on the reader.

**Blood and Honour** comes from a familiar mould — courtly intrigue, sibling rivalry and political skull-duggery — the trappings of Elizabethan drama within a fantasy backdrop. Not that the fantasy backdrop is conspicuous, world creating is put to one side. We know very little about Castle Midnight or the country of Redhart, except that they are on the verge of collapse. The characters and their allegiances within the plot are foregrounded and only the details that are pertinent to the plot are mentioned. Without the clutter of topographical, historical and ancestral details, the knives of the court are particularly sharp.

The central theme is Real and Unreal — the Unreal is disabling the castle with hauntings — hence the need to find a King amongst three princes to bring stability back to Castle Midnight. The Great Jordan is an egotistical actor who is involved in a conspiracy to

impersonate the King, who lies in his sick bed. The novel's best moments are when Jordan is concerned that he is on the wrong side. He is used to playing heroes and personification of good in travelling morality plays.

The plot is racy and entertaining — any criticism will slide off its back because Green has his tongue firmly in cheek.

### Harry Harrison **The Hammer and The Cross**

Legend, 1993, 430pp, £4.99

Reviewed by Max Sexton

The book's target readership is like its protagonist, a teenage boy. Set in Anglo-Saxon England during the Viking invasions, its pages throb with bloody barbarian mayhem. The protagonist, Shelf, has a Viking father and an English mother; the conflict of loyalties this might be expected to give rise to, either personal or cultural, are ignored. Shelf is an outsider who does not identify with either the Christian English or the Pagan Vikings and therefore is not a mental slave of either religion. Consequently, he is more enterprising and individual than the other characters. He restores Roman siege machines and shows himself to be a leader, fulfilling every boy's notion of a hero.

The Christian church is depicted as an organisation of old men which exists only to search for power to impose its ideology. The motif of age is used extensively within a more general system of opposites that contrasts youth linked to technology and personal liberty with age identified with religion, particularly Christianity and hierarchical power. Shelf is also linked to a young Alfred who defies the Church because Church authority conflicts with the authority of the Witan.

Shelf, because he is an outsider, is able to transcend the ideology of Christianity and Paganism. The young Alfred is, however, unable to challenge the Church's authority successfully because only the Church's men can read and write. Knowledge is therefore the key to freedom. Shelf's knowledge of the siege machines are key to his becoming free.

The blurb explains that **The Hammer and The Cross** is about the Church opposed to the Viking's pagan religion, which at the level of its teenage readership, it is, but the book's deeper themes can be found in all Harrison's earlier adult and more recent juvenile novels.

### Robert A. Heinlein **The Puppet Masters**

NEL, 1993, 224pp, £4.99

Reviewed by Julie Atkin

Heinlein's 1951 classic is the latest of his

novels to be reissued. The narrator is an agent of an American covert operations group, called in to investigate a flying saucer landing. Although on arrival, it appears to be a hoax, he discovers that the locals have been physically possessed by the inhabitants of the UFO, appearing normal, but obeying the commands of their master "...from the neck halfway down the back, was something that was not flesh. A couple of inches thick, it gave the corpse a round-shouldered, or slightly humped appearance. It pulsed."

Although set in the year 2007, this novel is a product of its time, the first person narrator's hard-boiled attitude giving it a Chanderlesque feel. The paranoia engendered by the puppet masters is a metaphor for the anti-Communist paranoia which America was undergoing at the time, as also depicted in **Invasion of The Bodysnatchers**. An atmospheric work which deserves to reach a new generation of readers.

### Robert A. Heinlein **Starship Troopers**

NEL, 1993, 222pp, £4.99

Reviewed by Sue Thomason

First published in 1960, **Starship Troopers** is now generally considered an SF classic, in which John Rico relates his progress from civilian to Captain in a space-going army, learning warrior skills and virtues, and regarding them as absolute standards of good.

Rico's home life, recruitment, training and combat experience seem largely extrapolated from the United States of about 50 years ago. The prose style is plain but literate, vivid and convincing, fast-paced and well-argued. Action alternates with favourable presentations of the militaristic philosophy underlying the book, and unfavourable presentations of peaceful life (seen as the inferior lifestyle of physically, mentally and morally inferior men).

Some aspects of Rico's life are noteworthy. His social milieu is almost entirely male (a few women are mentioned in passing). Although Heinlein has envisaged a military including women, their role is barely sketched in.

Rico's society has eliminated racial and cultural prejudice (serious discussion of sexuality is avoided, perhaps because the book was a 'juvenile'). Instead, xenophobia is rampant; alien species are seen (solely) as enemies and inferiors, and described in derogatory slang as "skinnies" and "bugs".

**Starship Troopers** is on my 'everyone should have read this' list. I enjoyed re-reading it, while rejecting its philosophy.

## Robert A. Heinlein Space Cadet

NEL, 1993, 172pp, £4.50

Reviewed by Lynne Bispham

This novel is set 100 years in the future, but reading it is like stepping into the past. It is **Boys' Own** Science Fiction for "there aren't any girls in the Randolph", the space cadets training ship, and Earth is cheerfully colonising a Venus inhabited by amphibious natives. Young Matt Dodson has always wanted to be an officer of the Space Patrol, the book describes his training as a cadet as he learns to cope with the physical and intellectual demands of his profession and face his first rescue mission.

Although the novel lacks the sophistication of much SF published today, it has a certain charm, and adult readers may enjoy nostalgia for SF as it used to be. However, it is older children who would most appreciate Matt's adventures in space.

## James Herbert Portent

NEL, 1993, 413pp, £5.99

Reviewed by Andy Sawyer

James Herbert is the acceptable (and successful) face of what used to be called the horror-nasty. **The Rats** helped define the form, but later works like **The Magic Cottage** and **Haunted** pushed out his explorations into further territories. **Portent** isn't so much "horror" as Apocalyptic New Age Science Fiction marketed for an audience which is largely unaware of its lack of originality.

A few years from now things have got worse, economically, ecologically and climatically. Violent storms, earthquakes and eruptions, all preceded by mysterious lights, are ravaging the planet. Rivers, a climatologist, is caught up in an attempt to unearth the cause, and finds himself fighting for two psychic children whose visions hold the key.

For bestseller readers who go for 'James Herbert' the brand name this may be new — indeed I overheard a fascinating conversation about 1993's American fables, Japanese earthquakes and soggy British summer which ended "just like the new James Herbert". For the rest of us, it's a limp mixture of chunks of exciting incident and sub-Gaian Whole-Earthism in which the physical effects come from collective subconscious guilt — so the poor buggers who get splattered by tidal waves can rest assured that it's their own fault. Herbert's bite-sized sequences of action rarely allow us any feeling for his victims, and is the sub-plot involving an obese, sadistic, black cult-priestess post-pc or what? Portent

is well-researched, detailed and full of events — an earthquake in London, giant hailstones in L. A. — which would have repaid further exploration, but for overall theme and message it's Stereotype City. If you're an SF reader, you don't need this.

## Brian Hodge Nightlife

Pan 1993, 404pp, £4.99

Reviewed by Martin Sutherland

When Justin Gray comes to Tampa to rebuild his life, which has been shattered by drugs, he makes the mistake of tagging along for just one more high, one more line... But the powder that Tony Mendoza gives him is green, not white, and he finds himself sucked down into a different world, a deeper world of familiars, primal urges and watchful demons. The drug is hekura-teri, taken from the Venezuelan rain forests; while Justin's mind is merely expanded, he watches as Trent Pollard takes his first hit of hekura-teri and is partly transformed into a jaguar — and goes on a rampage, killing people in a downtown nightclub. Justin escapes, but Trent's (human) body is found next day, dangling from a rope.

After this experiment Tony realizes that he can use the stuff to his own advantage, and starts plotting his way up the Florida drug lords' power ladder. But there is one problem he must eliminate first: Justin, who now knows about the powder and what it can do. Fortunately for Justin, he gets help from Kerebawa, a Yanomamu tribesman who has followed the trail of the hekura-teri all the way from South America, and wants it back. But Tony has the advantage of possessing the powder, and he's not afraid to use it ... on himself.

I had never heard of Brian Hodge before, but behind the uninspiring cover of **Nightlife** hides a real hammer of a novel. The pace is fast, the action is tense, and beyond this there is also a thoughtful story of love and betrayal. It is sexy and cynical at the same time. And above all, Hodge doesn't do the boring old one-sided 'drugs kill' spiel: there are no clear-cut good guys or bad guys, just people who have to be responsible for their own actions, and who have to live with their own mistakes. This fundamental human reality is the backbone of **Nightlife**, and the source of its strength, excitement and readability.

## Ken Kesey Sailor Song

Black Swan, 1993, 567pp, £5.99

Reviewed by Martyn Taylor

In this century of schisms, a great divide lies between those who read **One Flew Over The**

**Cuckoo's Nest** before Jack Nicholson's mug shot graced the paperback cover, and those who didn't. Kesey's **McMurphy** is one of the definitive anti-heroes of our times, just as his book is up there with **Catch 22** and **Gulag Archipelago** as definitive texts of our time. Kesey hasn't produced a novel for 25 years, his comeback is SF, of a sort.

**Sailor Song** is set in the generally fucked up world the Sierra Club tell us we're headed for unless we mended our ways, big time, yesterday. In the tiny Alaskan fishing port of Kuniak a cast of characters — The Bakatcha Bandit, Alice the Angry Alut and Billy Squid, plus many more — whom Steinbeck, Dickens and Rabelais would envy, try to make a living in a hostile world, hostility relieved only by sex and drugs and rock and roll. Into their lives returns Nick Levortov, Alice's estranged son, now a Hollywood producer intending to make his latest box office smash in Kuniak.

So, who believes anything a Hollywood producer says?

Kesey is a major literary figure who writes Great American Novels. He doesn't genuflect at the altar of St Isaac when it comes to literary technique. He creates characters which leap off the page and live with you (whether you like it or not) and his scientific developments exist the way they do for all of us real people. A designer drug which keeps you up for days and only lets you sleep when you come down; a non-rusting alloy of steel and aluminium; virtual reality games; these are just three of the many ideas genre authors might make into an entire novel. Kesey makes them part of the scenery.

This is a better novel than almost anything you are likely to read this year. So what if it isn't 'real' SF, and shame on you if you care.

## Ursula Le Guin Always Coming Home

HarperCollins, 1993, 563pp, £5.99

Reviewed by Sue Thomason

First published as a trade paperback in 1988. I don't know if the accompanying music cassette referred to in the text is still available.

"The people in this book" writes Le Guin, "might be going to have lived a long, long time from now in Northern California." The book contains their life stories, their prose fiction, drama and poetry, accounts of their calendars and customs, language, recipes, festivals, songs and musical notation, religious and philosophical beliefs, myth and metaphor, medical practice, etc., etc.. It is not a novel (though there is a long story in it, the history of Stone Telling, a woman of the Kesh), more a visitors' guide to Utopia; not a perfect lifestyle, but a whole one, a sustainable one.

**Always Coming Home** is a book which has (I hope) opened up my thinking, changed my life. It gives me a place to stand from which to evaluate the cultures among which I live. It gives me a direction to go in, something to aim at: the practice of peace, wholeness and sustainability, in whatever forms are appropriate to my situation.

I didn't find it a preachy book, but there are people who do. Those who aspire to the value systems of cyberpunk, hard SF or action-adventure stories will probably hate it. Nevertheless, if you haven't already tried reading it, I strongly recommend that you do.

**Phillip Mann**  
**Master of Paxwax**  
*Gollancz, 1993, 280pp, £4.99*  
 Reviewed by Chris Amies

The feuding feudal families, the telepathic aliens, the strange names, rituals and machinery and the long descriptive passages...we're not reading Asimov here, for example, or Heinlein, or Bob Shaw, or Iain M Banks (though Banks does likewise occasionally, for example in *Against a Dark Background*), or Paul J. McAuley, but in this baroque space opera there's definitely a flavour of Jack Vance in the air...

Mann's other (including later) novels often indulge in woman-hating, but the female characters in *Master of Paxwax* are intelligent and well rounded creations, even if he does succumb in one instance to the common trope of female-dominated cultures being beastly to men. In terms of characterisation this is probably his best, without too much of the baroque descriptiveness that weighs down *Escape to the Wild Wood*.

*Master of Paxwax* is the first volume of the Story of the Gardener, which sounds like the kind of downbeat, fatalist ending Mann goes in for (as in *Wulfisfarn and Eye of the Queen*). Pawl Paxwax starts as a prince and ends as a gardener. So it goes.

**Stephen Marley**  
**Shadow Sisters**  
*Legend, 1993, 432pp, £8.99*  
 Reviewed by John D. Owen

Third in the Chia Black Dragon series, *Shadow Sisters* continues the adventures of a 3500 year old Chinese vampire called Chia, whose return to China in the seventh century leads to the overthrow of the venal and ineffectual emperor, the tool of a resurrected member of Chia's family. The story is a mixture of Chinoiserie, vampire with a twist (Chia is not really a bloodsucker), the supernatural, and Kung-fu (especially the weird Shadow

Sisters, who dress and behave like the Chia of legend — only to find when they meet the original, she is different to their expectations). From the tumultuous beginning (where Chia is trying to escape from Rome after her plot to take-over the Papacy backfires), to the slightly over-contrived ending, Marley manages a steady flow of invention, while creating an interesting central character.

Crisply told, with a full head of steam propelling the involved plot along at a cracking pace, *Shadow Sisters* stands on its own. Different, but perhaps uncomfortably straddling genres, the mix of horror and fantasy gets strained, when the logic of the two genres is in conflict. This is especially true in the underlying mythology of the story, which mixes & matches Oriental and Western credos in ways that don't quite blend together. Not a great addition to the vampire pantheon, but worth a read for an Oriental slant on the myths.

**Stephen Marley**  
**Mortal Mask**  
*Legend, 1993, 404pp, £4.99*  
 Reviewed by Simon Lake

Stephen Marley seems to have immersed himself deeply in the myths and legends of ancient China to give a different slant to a standard fantasy novel. Chia Black Dragon and her twin brother Nyak are hybrids, born of a human mother and an immortal father. While Chia fears the magical powers she has inherited from her father and wishes to become human, Nyak is keen to exploit their evil potential to the full.

The plot is straightforward. Chia kills her brother when his evil acts get out of hand, only to discover four years later that his spirit has survived. Under attack from his followers, Chia is lured to a remote coastal bay where Nyak is preparing for a spectacular rebirth. The ending is predictable, but Marley compensates with inventive settings and a strong cast of supporting characters.

I could have done without some of the heavy-handed subtext that padded out the final scenes, but otherwise I found *Mortal Mask* an enjoyable, if undemanding read.

**Victor Milan**  
**Star Trek: From The Depths**  
*Titan, 1993, 280, £3.99*  
 Reviewed by Steve Palmer

Until this book arrived I had no idea that *Star Trek* had generated 61 novels. It was with a sense of dread that I approached it.

It is a desperately lame effort. Even the clichés are old lame clichés. From the opening scene-setting conflict to the oh-so-amusing

cameos of U. S. S Enterprise officers in bars, to Kirk asserting his authority over the stern female stereotype, through the hackneyed Kirk-in-trouble plot, to the predictable end in which big guns threaten to explode everywhere, there is bugger all here to interest anybody not already a sad Trekkie wreck.

The writing has all the sparkle of a dead tribble. "Most curious," says Spock. People's voices ring with the steel of command, hair is a luxuriant mane; Kirk's chest is frequently visible, for example when used by wailing women as a cushion. Images of past episodes are dropped in with toe-curling regularity — green Orion slave dancers and all. Even Khan gets a mention! And Chekov still can't pronounce his v's; isn't that joke a bit old now?

This is the sort of book that in a decade or so will be churned out by half-intelligent computers programmed by sad men overwhelmed by juvenile nostalgia. On page 23, Kirk says, "Carry on, Captain." This is indeed the *Carry On* of SF.

**Walter M. Miller**  
**A Canticle for Leibowitz**  
*Orbit, 1993, 356pp, £4.99*  
 Reviewed by Norman Beswick

First was the atom bomb on Hiroshima and (for the West) the unthinking euphoria of victory; then came the cold war, nuclear testing, the more devastating H-bomb. By the late 1950s, fear of nuclear holocaust had begun to grip the public consciousness, and this marvellous book began to appear in *Fantasy & Science Fiction*.

*Canticle* is the story of the monks of the Order of the Blessed Leibowitz, who preserve the relics of human knowledge after the catastrophe of the Flame Deluge and the riots of the simplification that followed. Slowly over the centuries human society returns and the scientific quest re-opens. Squabbling nations again possess nuclear weapons and the Leibowitz Order waits helplessly for the inevitable outcome.

The local and civil wars that have followed the end of the cold war in our day make the middle and later sections of this novel, if anything, more poignant still, and nothing has lessened the horror of nuclear potentiality. Miller's book has an authority, eloquence and resonance quite out of the ordinary. Scientific responsibility, the problem of historical knowledge and the nature of the religious testimony, these and other similar themes are woven deftly throughout a compelling narrative; but equally striking is the warmth and humour of the characterisation and the creativity of the author's invention. This is one

of SF's rare masterpieces.

This new edition has an inaccurately numbered contents page and on page 18 two Yiddish symbols are missing. Never mind; buy it.

### Peter Morwood Prince Ivan

*Legend, 1991, 280pp, £4.99*

### Firebird

*Legend, 1993, 308pp, £4.99*

Reviewed by Cherith Baldry

**Prince Ivan** and **Firebird** are the first two volumes of a series; a third, **The Golden Horde**, is also available.

The stories are set in a fantasy version of medieval Russia, where creatures from folk-tale rub shoulders with invented human characters and even the occasional figure from history, where sorcery and the Church co-exist comfortably and even overlap, and where supernatural happenings take place every day. I imagine the writer's intention is to create a form which blends fantasy with the historical novel; I found the books worked best when the fantasy was allowed to predominate.

**Prince Ivan** tells the story of the hero's adolescence. He is the youngest child and only son to Aleksander, Tsar of a small domain, and as such he displays all the characteristics of the charming but spoiled brat, until his marriage to the renowned Mar'ya Morevna. Their relationship shows an intriguing reversal of conventional sex roles: she is intelligent, sophisticated, experienced in government and in war; he is pretty, good in bed, out of his depth in anything approaching serious work. The writer might have got more mileage out of this situation if he had pursued it further, but in the dangerous situation which he himself creates, Prince Ivan has to emerge as a hero; I was never quite convinced.

**Firebird** covers a later episode in the life of Prince Ivan, when he and Mar'ya and other Russian princes face a Crusade against his supposedly heretical Russian Church led by the Grand Master of the Knights of the Teutonic Order. The events of this story are more closely interwoven with real history than Prince Ivan, where the folk-tale flavour predominates, and for this reason the book is less successful.

The historical and background detail is complex and convincing, the bibliographies show the writer's wide reading.

I found both books lively and enjoyable to read. Ivan moves away from the stereotype of a conventional hero figure and is welcome for that alone; it might seem ungrateful to suggest that he, and therefore the books, are a bit soft-centred.

### Tim Powers The Stress of Her Regard *Grafton, 1993, 605pp, £5.99* Reviewed by Susan Badham

In this novel Tim Powers returns to the historically based fantasy which he wrote in **The Anubis Gates** and **The Drawing of the Dark**. As usual, he is concerned with the relationship between humanity and other creatures in the cosmos, not extra-terrestrials, but magical creatures whose existence is faintly reflected in folklore and occult knowledge.

In a Tim Powers book it is worth knowing about folklore because the creatures it describes are real, powerful and dangerous. This book is no exception: the twist is that it's about creatures who are able to interact with mankind because they offer temptations that most people are too weak to resist. This enables Powers to describe an ecology of parasitism, which his hero, Dr Michael Crawford, discovers as he travels through the book. In the course of this journey Crawford encounters the romantic poets, Byron, Shelley and Keats, and begins to understand the effect these occult forces have had on history.

This book is both a fascinating display of ideas and an example of the skillful interweaving of the real and the possible. I strongly recommend it.

### Wayne Allen Salle Pain Grin

*TAL, 1993, 53pp, \$5.95*

Reviewed by Stephen Payne

Last year Wayne Allen Salle won the Bram Stoker award for his novel **The Holy Terror**. This year he presents us with this, **Pain Grin**, a journal, a diary that covers two years of his life. Try this: "My nerves are caffeine and my fingers cylinders brimming with broken glass" or this "my arms are weighted drapes or not-quite dead fish" or this "the only thing I cherish besides my eyes are my left thumb and forefinger". This is the horror of a man attempting to articulate his condition to the world. This is the horror of a man, Salle, with cerebral palsy; but he's not after sympathy — what's on offer here is anger, anger and an attempt to understand *why*.

There is no story (save the story of a real life) and much of the contents are in verse. The images of Ben-Gay and Salle's failing body run through the text of his life like recurring nightmares. But, of course, Salle can't wake up — he can't close the book or switch off the video. There is no sweet-flavoured coda to this story. At one point Salle admits, "I know I'll be dead by the mid '90s". It's a matter-of-fact comment for a thirty-three year

old, remarkable only in its understatement. Do not be fooled, this is a remarkable piece of writing.

I should add that this book was not received as a review copy; I went out and bought it. I felt it worthy of mention here because it is a book that deserves, no *needs*, to be read.

(**Pain Grin** is available from the New SF Alliance: NSFA c/o Chris Reed, **BBR** Magazine, PO Box 625, Sheffield S1 3GY)

### Robert Silverberg Kingdom of The Wall

*Grafton, 1993, 348pp, £4.99*

Reviewed by Benedict S. Cullum

Given a feudal society comprising numerous quaintly titled clans prone to periodic feasting, questing and shape-shifting (!), one might be forgiven for expecting this to be a fantasy. As the tale unfolds, however, Silverberg scatters hints that this is an SFnal setting, notwithstanding some of the more fabulous, non-realistic elements encountered within.

Poilar Crookleg, our first person narrator, tells of his journey with a diminishing band of Pilgrims chosen to scale the heights of the mountain range Kosa Saag; the purpose being to repeat the First Climb, following which an ancestor was reputed to have returned with gifts from the Gods.

Dedicated to Le Guin, there are nods to **Left Hand of Darkness**, whilst any allusion to another journey, in Dante's Divine Comedy, might be considered more oblique.

As might be expected, the journey is fraught with hazard and failure. Particularly effective is the counterbalance to Poilar's impetuosity to be found in Traiben, his frail intellectual compatriot: often Traiben gets to the heart of a problem that has beaten Poilar, although occasionally his speculations are too knowing and smack of authorial intrusion.

Not a bad way to leave a book, I admit to wondering what becomes of Poilar and the few remaining Pilgrims after we leave them: what is the impact of their discoveries?

### Anthony Swithin The Nine Gods of Safadné

*Fontana, 1993, 270pp, £4.99*

Reviewed by Andy Sawyer

The fourth (but probably not final — Simon must return to reclaim his girl) instalment of the "Perilous Quest for Lyonesse". Swithin harks back to an older style of romancing in this story of a land on the island of Rockall with its own flora, fauna and gods. This sequence has echoes of Edgar Rice Burroughs and H. Rider Haggard. A reincarnated Princess, evil priests, doughty warriors and



ingenious heroes, conspiracies and battles, go to make a realm which is considerably more realised than much of modern fantasy.

"Lyonesse" may spring from a Tolkienish lust for world-creation, but apart from the medievalism (the time is the early 15th century of our Earth) Swithin has few obvious influences from Tolkien and writes the better for it. True, the plot is frequently held up for leisurely strolls around Rockallian natural history or custom and we've met most of the character-types before, but if you're happy with that there's much to appreciate.

### Roger Trilling & Stuart Swezey (eds) The Wild Palms Reader

Warner, 1993, 127pp, £12.99  
Reviewed by Julie Atkin

This book is designed as a companion to the **Wild Palms** TV series. Although, at the time of writing, it has not yet been shown, I shall continue the great Vector tradition of discussing TV tie-ins before viewing — see Dave Garnett's **Star Trek** article in issue 43.

The series is based on a comic strip by Bruce Wagner. The **Reader** is a collection of articles set in the programme's world, interspersed with extracts from the script and from the original comic. Contributors include Disch, Spinrad, Cadigan, Sterling and Gibson, together with names from the music world such as Malcolm McLaren, Genesis P. Orridge and Motorhead's Lemmy.

The basic plot of **Wild Palms** concerns an SF writer, Anton Kreutzer, who has founded Synthotics — a mystic/religious set of beliefs, has dirty fingers in big business, owns the Wild Palms TV network, and is a US senator. Any resemblance to Hubbard and Dianetics are, naturally, purely coincidental. The series is set in the year 2007 and the **Reader** fills in the background details, with letters, memos, magazine articles and book excerpts from the characters' pasts, beginning in 1945 with a letter from Kreutzer's part-Japanese mother, interned during WW2. As the items move forward, we are given realistic and amusing extrapolations into the future — I liked the article from a 1999 **Rolling Stone** issue where the writer watched "one-time sensation Madonna Ciccone before she ran to fat."

An attractive A4 sized paperback, the **Reader** is lovingly laid out with text over background pictures — with the occasional reading difficulty which that formula entails. As an esoteric exercise, I enjoyed it, despite being unable to review the book in its true context as a companion to the series — which it may have spoiled for me, as I know who dies!

### Jack Vance The Cadwal Chronicles Araminta Station

NEL, 1993 (1st Printing), 480 pp, £5.99

Ecce and Old Earth

NEL, 1993, 435pp, £5.99

Throy

NEL, 1993, 186pp, £15.99

Reviewed by Graham Andrews

Jack Vance has been around so long (since *The World-Thinker*: Thrilling Wonder Stories, 1945), he's become oddly invisible. Popular (high sales), respected (Hugo/Nebula/Jupiter/Life Achievement awards), but people take him for granted. "Hmm... another Vance novel. Still at it, then? Now, who's this new fella — Card/Gibson/McDonald?"

Vance is a well-regarded mystery writer (*The Man in the Cage*, *Bad Ronald*, etc.), winning the Edgar (Allan Poe) award in 1960. However, SF/fantasy readers know him best as the creator of several concurrent series: **Magnus Ridolph**; **Dying Earth**; **Big Planet**; **Demon Princes**; **Abercrombie Station**; **Tschai Planet of Adventure**; **Durdane**; **Alastor**; **Galactic Effectuator**; **Lyonesse**; and — bang up to date — the **Cadwal Chronicles**.

**Araminta Station** is the scene-setting first Cadwal novel.

"Preliminary" ... Halfway along the Perseid Arm a capricious swirl of galactic gravitation has caught up ten thousand stars and sent them streaming away at an angle, with a curl and a flourish at the end. This is Mircea's Wisp... To the side of the curl... is the Purple Rose System, comprising three stars: Lorca, Sing and Syrene... Syrene controls three planets, including Cadwal, the single inhabited world of the system... Cadwal is an Earth-like planet seven thousand miles in diameter, with close to Earth-normal gravity.

"Cadwal was first explored by the locator Neirmann, a member of the Naturalist Society of Earth. (Neirmann) recommended that Cadwal be protected forever as a natural reserve, secure from human exploitation. The Society asserted formal possession of Cadwal, and issued a decree of Conservancy: the Charter. The three continents of Cadwal were named Ecce, Deucas and Throy, each differing markedly from the other two..."

I like Vance's modestly effective approach to world-building; he doesn't hit you over the head with his slide rule, like the hard-science wallahs. Footnotes complement the narrative rather than interrupt it, often adding human/humanoid interest. Random example: "Since islands were almost absent from the oceans of Cadwal, the principal discouragement to cruising lay in the lack of pleasant

destinations. Dedicated yachtsmen might sail south to Stroma on Throy, or circumnavigate Deucas or even Cadwal itself: in the latter case making no landfall other than the dangerous coast of Ecce".

Apart from the Naturalist Society/Cadwal conservancy, pivotal organisations include: the LPF (Life, Peace and Freedom Party); the IPCC (Interworld Police Co-ordination Company) — Bureau B at Araminta Station is an IPCC affiliate; the Comps (contraction of Comphaw's Police Sergeantry — an elite militia, responsible only to their titular head).

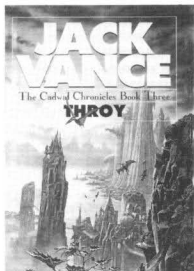
The cast of characters is trilogy-strong. Glawen Clattuc takes centre stage for much of the time: "His mother (Marya), now dead, had been born off-world; his father, Scharde, (was) an official at Bureau B... Glawen, a sober and realistic youth, hoped for a (Status Index of) 24, which would allow him a chance at Agency status". Other leading figures: Eustace Chilke (airport manager, Araminta Station); Spanchetta Clattuc (Dolly Parton playing Alexis Carrington-Colby-Dexter); Namour co-Clattuc (Agency Commissioner of Temporary labour); Bodwynn Wook (Superintendent of Bureau B).

"A source of cheap, plentiful and docile labour... was needed. What could be more convenient than the population of Lutwen Atoll, three hundred miles north-east of Araminta Station? These were the Yips, descendants of runaway servants, illegal immigrants and others". The Yips form part of the problem and part of the solution. Class warfare, overpopulation, culture shock. Malthus Meets Che Guevara? But the Yips are a particularly lumpen proletariat; more talked about than talking, more acted upon than acting.

**Ecce and Old Earth** is the middle volume of this tight little trilogy. Also the best; or — rather — my personal favourite. Well, there's no such thing as an im-personal favourite. The original Cadwal charter + Certificate of Registration has been lost/stolen from the archives back on Old Earth. Glawen Clattuc hares off to investigate, along with colleague/love interest Wayness Tamm.

**Throy** is kick-the-airlock-down fiction at its very best. Glawen Clattuc/Eustace Chilke/Wayness Tamm set out to find the wayward industrialist, Lewyn Bardus (+ female companion, Flitz), and that all-purpose villain, Namour co-Clattuc. The action is hectic, all over the Gaen Reach. Justice traps the guilty. Vance shows greater mercy to the malefactors, here, than he did to the Demon Princes or the Cliff Barnes-type in **The Dragon Masters**. Mellowing with age? And if anybody is worried about dear old Cadwal, why — be still, those fluttering hearts!

Although Throy is a novella compared with



**Araminta Station and Ecce and Old Earth.** Vance hasn't skimped on the galactic exotica. Sample: "In discussing Gilbert's Green Star, many cosmologists dismissed the unusual green tint as an illusion, stating that the star was actually iridescent white or perhaps ice-blue. They changed their minds only when they saw Gilbert's Star for themselves. The color (sic) was most often attributed to heavy metal ions in the stellar atmosphere: an opinion to which the spectroscope gave equivocal support".

In his prentice years, Vance took some critical flak for serving too much pastry and not enough pie: **The Dying Earth, Big Planet.** He soon redressed the balance: **The Languages Of Pao, The Blue World. The Cadwal Chronicles** feature his deliberately old-fashioned style at its best/worst (delete as appropriate) without stinting on plot and subplots. Thankfully, however, all three books contain many fanciful passages to nowhere-in-particular. I like that kind of thing, even if you don't.

The **Cadwal Chronicles** are quaintly futures past. The metric system/neutral pronouns/fax machine must have been disintegrated. As for computers... Vance doesn't feel the need to rabbit on about CP/M, dummy variables, RAM, REM, ROM, or vertical scrolling (thank you, **Illustrated Computer Dictionary**). Just the job for those people who can't tell a daisy wheel from Daisy Duck — and who couldn't care less.

**Vernor Vinge**  
**A Fire Upon The Deep**  
*Millenium, 1993, 579pp, £4.99*  
 Reviewed by Colin Bird

This is a book that has received rave reviews and award nominations aplenty. An epic Space Opera crafted with considerable skill and a complex story told with verve. But the real joy of Vinge's novel is his attention to

characterisation, particularly his beautifully realised alien creatures, details often lost in the sweep of an epic.

The story takes place in a Milky Way many millenium in the future, in which physical constants vary across regions of the galaxy. The outer zone is populated by advanced races and super-intelligent entities all linked by the Net, the Unthinking Depths contain creatures struggling with simple technology which is all that function in their region. Some human scientists discover an ancient artefact and in so doing unleash a Blight that spreads through the outer zone destroying worlds. Two of the scientists escape with a secret that could destroy the Blight, but their ship crashes on a backward world in the Unthinking Depths.

It's hard to hold a book this size together, but Vinge switches effortlessly from the small scale action and intrigue on the planet of the Times to space battles against a backdrop of galactic empires. He builds to a tense finale merging the two levels of the story together. It's a pleasure to find a book that is complex and challenging and still a lot of fun, but **Fire Upon The Deep** deserves all the plaudits.

**Bruce Wagner**  
**Force Majeure**

*St Martin's Press, 1993, 469pp, \$14.95*  
 Reviewed by Chris Amies

"Force Majeure": the law which a movie producer can invoke to get out of having to pay his scriptwriter. So: Bud Wiggins, script-writer in the making and on the make in the World's Weirdest Town (L. A.) nearly makes it but gets royally shafted instead. His life becomes a series of more and more hallucinatory episodes as he takes a tour through the Dantesque inferno of late-20th Century America. He attempts relationships with several women but, because he is a nasty and misogynist little oick ("men are getting very pissed off with women", he says, and nothing he does alters that opinion), gets serially dumped. He meets an ageing and demented Rabbi who invokes Bud's Jewish past and very nearly puts him back together again but then is revealed as... no.

So where's the SF content? Everywhere. Did I say "Planet Hollywood"? Wagner/Wiggins's America is an alien culture, here laid open with its near-crazy bonding rituals, enforced bonhomie, viciousness and backstabbing... reading Hunter Thompson (for example) is difficult enough with his cultural (sic) references, but this tale needs a lexicon at the end, a definition of every trope associated with this America that resembles nothing so much as a British public school grown fat on its institutionalised exploitation, misogyny

and bullying. This is **Confederacy of Dunces**: the '90s remake. Bud Wiggins is his own disaster, a walking morass of prejudices, a Don Quijote in a strange land, forever a smile or a snarl away from redemption but always, in the long run, He Who Gets Shafted. It's a shame, but there you are.

**Margaret Weiss**  
**& Tracy Hickman**  
**The Hand of Chaos**

*Bantam Press, 1993, 463pp, £14.99*  
 Reviewed by K. V. Bailey

"Another damned great fat book, Mr Gibbon," George III remarked on being presented with the latest volume of **The Decline and Fall of The Roman Empire**. Just my sentiments when this hit my post-box; over 450 pages; heavy as a family Bible. And it's only the fifth of the "Death Gate Cycle" seven! I've not read **Dragon Wing, Elven Star**, etc., so was not oriented to this sudden plunge into an intricate, fragmented universe of four reciprocally functioning realms of air, earth, fire and water, to follow the activities of Haplo, the lone Patryn, who has a fact-finding kind of role in the mission to unite these realms. Initiate readers can obviously jump right in, but I, a novice, was grateful for over 20 pages of introduction and as many appendices and charts. Also the narrative itself abounds in footnotes, though many need (and some have) cross-references to enlighten the tyro: e.g. "The dragons on Arianus are not to be confused with those who occasionally appear in the guise of dragons — such as the serpent-elf Sang-drax and the dragon serpents of Celestara."

The action in this volume takes place mainly on Arianus (world of air), with its three sub-realms and population of warring humans, elves and dwarves, these last slave-servitors of the Kicksey-winsey machine turning out its "product goods". (The dwarf Limbeck's "demytification" of this is a genuinely funny self-parodic piece.) The plot, with its constant back-retrievals, is a maze, the reader transported from location to location — these usefully signposted and imaginatively described. **The Hand of Chaos** is a fantasy for pleasure reading, surely welcomed by the already addicted and an entertainment with perhaps unsuspected rewards for investigating newcomers.

**Walter Jon Williams**  
**Aristoi**

*Grafton, 1993, 448pp, £4.99*  
 Reviewed by Maureen Speller

Most fiction thrives on conflict rather than

stability, while perfection, by its very nature, is not that interesting. In *Aristoi*, Walter Jon Williams has his work cut out to prove otherwise. His Earth, painstakingly rebuilt after a nano-engineering holocaust, is in the charge of the *Aristoi*. Exceptionally intelligent and creative, they rule the Demos according to the Platonic ideal of selflessness and have finally achieved perfect stability. Immense longevity is the norm, disease is almost unknown and everyone possess a computer implant. The *Aristoi* have direct access to the Hyperlogos, a huge computer, and have developed aspects of their human personality to the point where these can be summoned at will. They have a virtual technology of such sophistication that they spend much of their lives in that milieu while their bodies live under the control of these daemons.

The first part of the novel is a lavish description of this world as viewed through the eyes of Gabriel, a young *Aristoi*. As the perfect meals, rooms and clothing pile up, a plot of sorts develops. Gabriel discovers that a rogue *Aristoi* has been covertly pursuing genetic experiments and heroically sets off to solve the mystery. Away from his own environment, no longer in control, Gabriel's plans to apprehend Saigo fail disastrously. Capture, torture and the temporary loss of his skills are intended to show that Gabriel too is human, but his escape and subsequent ecstatic reception by the *Aristoi* are too absurd for this to be convincing.

The final revelation that Yuan, the original *Aristoi*, engineered the situation knowing that stagnation would set in, is too simplistic when the fundamental *Aristoi* philosophy remains undisturbed. That Gabriel is supposedly a better person because he has discovered his purpose in life, to hunt down Yuan, misses the point of Yuan's invention. Certainly, Williams does nothing to convince me that much has altered. Instead we are back where we started with still no hope of change. Had Williams properly explored some of the questions raised in *Aristoi*, it would be easier to forgive him the overextended absurdity of the world and the people he has created. By ignoring these questions, *Aristoi* has been reduced to a manual for futuristic interior design and cosmetic surgery.

### F. Paul Wilson The Tomb

NEL, 1993, 365pp, £4.99  
Reviewed by Ian Sales

This book was first published in the UK in 1985, and the bulk of the book's action takes place in "198-". It concerns Repairman Jack,

The Equaliser in all but name, who "fixes" injustice for a fee. Since this isn't prime time TV, Jack doesn't have to be as altruistic as Edward Woodward, nor do all his "fixes" involve friends or relatives.

The *Tomb* is set in New York and consists of two linked cases undertaken by Repairman Jack. In the first he has to retrieve a stolen necklace. The other case involves the wealthy English aunts of his ex-girlfriend — who dumped Jack like a ton of bricks when she discovered what he did for a living.

Obviously, these two "fixes" are linked and as the book progresses we learn that the link is via an ancestor of the English aunt, who had pillaged an Indian Temple during the days of the British Raj. Captain Albert Westphalen (an odd name for a Brit., considering that it's a German state) discovered a cache of jewels in a temple of Kali. He killed the priests and then stole jewels, which formed the basis of the Westphalen fortune. The two aunts, their brother (Jack's girlfriend's ex-husband) and the girlfriend's daughter are the sole descendants of Captain Albert. Kusum Bhakti is a descendant of the temple priests and in order to purify his karma from a past gross misdeed, must kill the family. Fortunately, Repairman Jack ends up in the way.

Whilst this is bog-standard horror (even down to the metallic lettering on the cover), it redeems itself to some extent in that Jack's adventures are predicated on his relationship with two women: his girlfriend and Kusum's sister, Kolabati. We also learn the event that started Jack on his life of equalising. Jack is an interesting character. It's hard to say the same of the rest of the cast: the English aunts are about as English as a Rhode Island Red and Wilson's knowledge of India seems cursory at best.

If you like trashy horror, you could do worse than *The Tomb*. If you like proper books, you're better off avoiding it. By the way, I couldn't find a tomb in the book anywhere.

### T. M. Wright Strange Seed

Gollancz, 1993, 309pp, £4.99  
Reviewed by John Newinger

This novel and its author come highly recommended. Whitley Streiber, Charles Grant and Dean Koontz have all enthusiastically praised Wright's literary ability, while Stephen King and Douglas Winter have both acclaimed *Strange Seed* in particular as one of the best horror novels of the last 40 years. Well what do they know! I found it an enormous let down: the least interesting of the last half-

dozen horror novels (all the others by British authors let it be noted) that I have read.

The story tells of how Paul and his wife Rachel return to the old abandoned family farm in upstate New York, the Naples Penn Yan area. They find the farm vandalised, desecrated by persons unknown, but nevertheless do their best to settle in. Rachel's expectation was that the area would be like Central Park, but wilder. Instead, it is as if they have stepped off the map into an deserted world where different, older rules apply.

A lot could have been made of this. The wild children living the woods could have opened a door into fear and wonder, but Wright attempts to portray the beleaguered couple's psychological and emotional disintegration, which is beyond his literary range. The book becomes mired in clumsy attempts at exploring uninteresting characters while the threat that confronts them remains unexplored.

At the end of the book my feelings were very much of the 'so what', 'who cares' and 'I'm glad that's over' kind. Of course, I could be wrong.

### Roger Zelazny Prince of Chaos

Orbit, 1993, 241pp, £4.99  
Reviewed by Jan Malique

Merlin Corwin is thrust into the thick of battle for supremacy between Chaos and Order in *Prince of Chaos*, tenth book in the *Amber* series.

Political intrigue is rife, as a power struggle ensues for the throne of chaos, with Merlin placed as favourite to succeed. This does not go down to well with other interested parties, family harmony not being a strong point. Assassinations abound naturally. The Jewel of Judgement is missing, the forces of disorder want it back, Merlin's father is missing, he wants him back.

The path to Corwin's release is one paved with dark thoughts and deeds, and the answers to many questions are hidden within the perilous journey. Merlin finds his destiny staring him in the face, not unlike the early morning glimpse in the mirror — a bleary-eyed shudder which turns to resignation. He holds the key to the survival of the House of Sawall and restoring the balance between darkness and light.

It would be a good idea to read previous volumes in the series to get a fuller picture, the text in this volume is multi-layered (hey!) and rather romantic, but I would need to read it several times to understand all the different threads running through it.

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