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SPECIAL REVIEWS SUPPLEMENT

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The Critical Journal of the BSFA



First Impressions

Reviews of Hardbacks and Paperback Originals

edited by
Paul Kincaid

Will Baker

Star Beast

Hodder & Stoughton, 1996, 472pp, £16.99

Reviewed by Andy Mills

You may be forgiven if, upon seeing the title of this long novel, you anticipate meeting a space opera within the covers. This, however, is not the case. *Star Beast* is set firmly on Earth. The title derives from one character's definition of mankind: 'dancing star beasts' (and later, from another: 'For we are the stuff of stars, made each in dance various, molecule to molecule, the whole a harmony, breathing as one!'). If that appears rather daft to you, I'm glad; it appeared equally daft to me when I read it.

Star Beast is a direct sequel to *Shadow Hunter*. If you recall Paul Kincaid's review of the latter novel in Vector 175, this may be an appropriate point to stop and move on to the next review, because *Star Beast* provides more of the same.

During the Great Southern War apes and escapees from a prison mate and - due to radioactivity - produce offspring. A subhuman species develops - *homo lapis* or the Pobra - which has peculiar abilities, including that of communicating with and controlling other animals. Little Ronald Drager has impregnated a Pobra called Tima and the two are being kept in a research institute. At the same time the Pobra, who had previously avoided contact with humans, are swarming out of their hideaways and moving en masse into human areas, where they are variously exterminated or kept in holding camps. Political opinion is polarised on the issue of what should be

done about the Pobra - and the situation is complicated by the revelation that the Pobra are carriers of a retrovirus which gives:

...a predisposition to vision... and sensitivity to rhythm, with occasional side-effects of hermaphroditism, unusual body hair, and a tendency to energetic play.

We are, as you can see, being consistently daft here...

Ronald and his pregnant mate escape from the research institute along with the Director and his assistant, who have befriended the couple. Shenanigans ensue as they are hunted by various human and Pobra factions. Some want them destroyed, some think the pair's baby will be the next Messiah. Which group will prevail?

Frankly, I couldn't give a damn. There is a huge cast in this novel, but Baker manages to make the reader care not a jot for any of them. In part, this is because he chops and changes between multiple viewpoints, chapter eight is the first to follow directly on from the one before. Mainly, though, it is because *Star Beast* is dense with various babbles: scientific, ecological, mystical and power-political. I have a sneaking feeling the novel is meant to be at least slightly funny, but the writing is far too heavy-handed to lend itself to humour. What it is, though, is a turgid read which is summed up by one of the characters:

I know the whole thing is ridiculous - a weird animal messiah, and worshipping germs, and rockenroll as apocalypse.

Yes, indeed.

Robert T. Bakker *Raptor Red* Bantam Press, 1995, 241pp, £12.99

Reviewed by Maureen Speller

Why do people keep writing stories about animals? What is this preoccupation with what Margaret Blount called *Animal Land* in her study of the same name? Perhaps it is because, while undeniably alien, they are at least immediate to our own world. We can study them in great detail and, as Henry Williamson did with *Tarka the Otter*, portray their lives accurately but without necessarily using formal scientific description. Thus, the author is to some extent free to imagine what an animal might think or feel, as Garry Kilworth has done with foxes, hares and wolves. There is a danger, of course, in going too far with this enterprise, as Richard Adams demonstrated with *Watership Down*, investing his rabbits, otherwise recognisably lapine in their behaviour, with a complex mythology. Had Adams moved his creations closer to Kenneth Grahame's River Bank and Wild Wood, readers might have been more comfortable with their taste for story-telling; as it was, Fiver and Hazel and their compatriots were doomed to an uneasy tenancy in Animal Land, challenged by the likes of the Animals of Farthing Wood and a hundred other overly humanised animals.

I doubt Robert T. Bakker would be delighted to see *Raptor Red* placed in this illustrious assembly, but where else can one assign it? What does one do with a novel which is simply a description of a year in the life of a dinosaur, and a very speculative life at that? Compared with what we already know about rabbits, foxes, wolves or otters, our knowledge of dinosaurs is slight. Most of what we do know about *Utahraptor* comes from fossil remains a hundred and twenty million years old, extrapolative techniques and Bakker's own radical theories; this is, after all, the man who plausibly argued that dinosaurs were warm-blooded.

So, Bakker's agenda seems straightforward, to imagine how his raptor might have lived all those millions of years ago. But why cast it as fiction? Why not settle for a populist non-fiction account of how dinosaurs might have lived? It's not as though Bakker needs to take refuge in fiction after airing his highly controversial theories in *The Dinosaur Heresies*, a well-argued and extremely readable assault on conventional palaeontological thinking. For whatever reason, Bakker felt he would gain more by turning to fiction but in doing so he stumbled into those well-concealed traps which await any writer of animal fiction.

Not least of these is that he anthropomorphises his subject, though whether this is intentional or inadvertent is not always easy to tell. Admittedly, we as humans can never really know what goes through another creature's head, not even a fellow human. We conjecture, we extrapolate, we observe enough to suggest that animals do suffer at a mate's death, and we ascribe their behaviour to what we call grief. It's another thing altogether, though, to put the reader into a dinosaur's mind and present a wide range of emotions and calculated decisions about life at a level suggesting human capabilities of reasoning, when, I strongly suspect, blind instinct had a much greater hold. To give Bakker his due, he does endeavour to suggest the early days of the raptor, with its brain as a *tabula rasa* onto which certain sights and sounds are imprinted, but quite how we get from there to Raptor Red assessing her adult sister's abilities as a parent and hunter, is anyone's guess. I can't help thinking that artistic licence has won out over Darwinian theories.

Similarly, as Raptor Red ranges through Cretaceous Utah, searching for a new mate and dealing with the vicissitudes of prehistoric life, Bakker too often slips into the other great pitfalls of animal fiction, delivering lectures on aspects of life that Raptor Red can know nothing about (I particularly enjoyed the interlude with the small furry proto-mammal nervously awaiting attack in its burrow) or else descending into sickly sentimentality. Entirely appropriate though it might be on the River Bank, I found it far less acceptable when Bakker wound up his story with a happy-ever-after scenario worthy of a Gilbert and Sullivan operetta, with every lad, (including the elderly protodactyl who had earlier, and quite improbably, sworn himself to celibacy), getting his lass. En route, we have experienced the full gamut of emotions as girl dinosaur meets boy dinosaur, finds he doesn't get on too well with her sister, has to fight off a pack of tough girl dinosaurs for his attention, loses him and then regains him, while he meanwhile ingratiates himself with her sister by saving her chick from certain death. Touching, but a little far-fetched.

Ultimately, I fear this novel will have to be chalked up as a valiant effort but nevertheless an evolutionary dead-end. Bakker is an engaging personality who writes and talks about dinosaurs in a way that infects people with his undoubted enthusiasm for his subject, but he ought to stick to non-fiction. At best, *Raptor Red* has a certain elusive charm, but I was left with the guilty thought that it cashed in on Bakker's association with the special effects artists working on *Jurassic Park* as much as it shed any light on life in the Cretaceous Period.

Terry Bisson *Pirates of the Universe*

Tor, 1996, 285pp, \$22.95

Reviewed by Paul Kincaid

There are two clear strands to Terry Bisson's work. In his fantasy (*Talking Man*, 'England Underweigh', 'Bears Discover Fire') he is light, inventive and a true original. In his science fiction (*Voyage to the Red Planet*, 'Two Guys from the Future', 'The Shadow Knows') he is jokey, inventive, and essentially backward looking. There is, in the reader and, one suspects, in the author, a sense that underlies his science fiction, a sense born in the radio serials of the 1950s and '60s. His science

fiction is a celebration of wobbly scenery, silver spacesuits and the can-do spirit of American adventure. The title, *Pirates of the Universe*, positions this new novel firmly in that tradition. But that is only half the story.

Half the story is as up-to-the-minute science fiction as space invaders. Strange alien creatures, many times the size of a whale but as tenuous as a cloud, have started to appear in the space between Earth and the Moon. They are not invaders, in fact, no-one knows what they are, they seem totally indifferent to the humans who buzz around them in their spaceships; but their flesh is the most prized substance on Earth. So abandoned space stations have been re-occupied and daring space-jockeys dart in close to the aliens, 'peteys', to peel back their skin and

secure their future wealth, and with it entry to a Disney dreamland. (It is a curious feature of Bisson's science fiction as nostalgia that in his stories the dream of space has been abandoned and must be reclaimed, usually under capitalist impulse.)

Gunther Glenn is one of these space-jocks, thrilled by the adventure of space and nearing the end of his tour of duty. One more mission and he will have racked up all he needs to retire to the elite luxury of the Disney utopian park. But things don't go as smoothly as that, on his penultimate mission a colleague dies and Gun finds himself heading back to Earth with a mysterious parcel.

This is where the second half of the story comes in. For Gun is grounded, his money frozen, and he is caught up in the laocoonian coils of a byzantine, kafkaesque bureaucracy. For Bisson contrasts the broad, glamorous sweep of adventure in space with a near-future Earth that is shabby, narrow and convoluted. To get his case considered by the correct authority, for instance, Gun must queue in a bare, cavernous building to buy a lottery ticket – if his number comes up, his case will be considered.

What is behind this bureaucratic impasse, Gun only

discovers when he travels home across a blitzed and shattered America. For among his family he not only rediscovers old loves and old values, he also finds out that his dissident, imprisoned brother has escaped. It is here, in the run-down rural enclave where rusted old cars are gathered and carefully milked for any remaining oil they contain, that Bisson seems most at home, most comfortable. This certainly is the most convincing part of the book. When Gun returns to win his struggle with bureaucracy it is noticeably less vivid, less fully realised than the scenes in the family home. And Bisson's humour does not suit the kafkaesque anywhere near so well as it does the gentle parody of science fiction cliché.

When the story finally lifts off into space again, it recovers its early vigour. The chaotic, nanotech-run-wild sections of the space station 'gone native' read a little like an attempt to keep up with science fiction now rather than science fiction gone before, and they don't work as well as they might. But there is still an old-fashioned breathless excitement to the final adventure, the final revelation of the nature of the 'peteys'. It is when he heads into the new that Bisson feels most traditional, and most successful.

Martin Booth *Adrift in the Oceans of Mercy*

Simon & Schuster, 1996, 292pp, £15.95

Reviewed by Andrew Butler

Every so often a writer tries to limit the activities open to their protagonists: a classic example being one of Samuel Beckett's plays where, in the first act, the main character is buried up to her waist in sand, and in the second act buried up to her neck. Such minimalism can be fascinating – a *tour de force* as the author works within and against tightly defined limits – or deadly dull. Martin Booth's new novel strikes an unsatisfying middle-ground.

The setting is a Russian space station, with one cosmonaut left on board. In the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the political and financial chaos which follows, a mission on the *Mir IV* station is to be abandoned, with one cosmonaut left to monitor things before he is relieved. Unfortunately, the replacement never arrives and they have run out of money to evacuate this lone cosmonaut. Since the Russians are unwilling to turn to the Americans for help (even if a link-up between the shuttle and this *Mir* were possible), the cosmonaut is left to orbit the Earth, like Walt Dangerfield from *Dr Bloodmoney*, until his air or power or food runs out, or until the orbit decays sufficiently for the station to burn up in the atmosphere.

The cosmonaut remains unnamed – he may be Alexei or Andrei, he certainly is not called Mikhail – and the effect of this is to emphasise how identity is tied up with memory and company. Alone, his mind drifts over past events: his friend Pyotir, his experiences in the Afghanistan war, his training. He remembers stories of past leaders of Russia – the architecture of Peter the Great, Brezhnev's dying wish to be buried face

down, Andropov's relationship with a chauffeur, even the assassination of Rasputin. The implication is that Russia has always been in chaos, and has always been incompetent.

As his own mind deteriorates, so the equipment on board *Mir IV* is slowly failing. At first he uses the manual to repair things as faults develop, but when the station is struck by a remnant of an old American satellite (America is chaotic as well?) it is the beginning of the end: he has to close systems down to a minimum, and barely subsist. Always he has an option of turning everything off: without heating he would die just as he would die without oxygen or pressure. Yet despite knowing the last possible date he can survive to, he will try and reach that date.

Presumably this novel is a metaphor for life: that there will come a time when we die, and many moments in life when we could die, and yet we have to continue on. Power is wielded by fools, but somehow we muddle on. Except that the ever-present spectre of death suggests that it is pointless to continue, a waste of time. Yet the fact that this is a first person narration poses the possibility that the cosmonaut will, against all odds, survive to be telling the tale.

Booth has not written science fiction before, with the arguable exception of his novel about artificial insemination, *Toys of Glass*. Almost as if he wishes to prove his scientific credentials, he gives blow by blow descriptions of how toilets work in space, and the precise geometry of polar orbits. Frankly my eyes glaze over at such equations, but surely that is part of the point: life is space with nothing to do is boring. Real excitement can only derive from going inwards – into memory, into inner rather than outer space.

It seems foolish to write such a thing, but here I get the feeling that, three or four decades on, the mainstream is finally catching up with science fiction.

David Brin *Brightness Reef* Orbis, 1996, 643pp, £16.99

Reviewed by Joseph Nicholas

Brightness Reef is billed on its title page as the first volume in a new 'Uplift' trilogy, but is actually the first third of what will presumably be an 1,800-page novel: the action stops in mid-flow, with all existing issues remaining unresolved and several new ones crowding in. Thus we have still to discover, for example, the relationship between the off-world stranger whose crash-landing on Jijo opens the story and the other visitors who claim to be engaged in research but whose origins are equally cloudy; why the mysterious visitors are seeking to foment inter-species war

between the various races of aliens illegally settled in a corner of Jijo; and whether, as the visitors claim, humanity really did have a patron species to uplift it to galactic sentence rather than being a wolfing breed which has made it on its own. Although, since it's obvious that the answer to this last question will be the trilogy's major revelation, Brin equally obviously has to defer providing an answer for as long as possible.

One suspects that Brin may plump for the wolfing solution – a Heinleinian recapitulation of humanity as the toughest creature in the universe – given that humanity supposedly fled to Jijo in the first place because it doesn't have a patron species to protect it, but even so the premise which underlies the idea of uplift is quite false. Simply put, this is that evolution has a direction and a sense of purpose, that it is something which proceeds naturally from 'lower' to 'higher' forms of life, and that it has as an inbuilt goal the transformation of 'primitive' or 'disorganised' creatures into more 'advanced' or self-aware creations. It was because of these connotations that Darwin himself rejected the term 'evolution' to describe what he preferred to call 'descent with modification', which suggests an altogether more random process which ninety-nine percent of the time would lead to extinction as modification after modification failed to fit species to the available niches. To suggest, by contrast, that evolution can be controlled and directed is to suggest that the patron species not only has prior knowledge of all the available niches but also of how they will change across time and therefore at which ones to aim – and to these three absurdities one has to add a fourth: that the patron knows which bits of the DNA of the species to be uplifted have to be modified to achieve the desired result.

It's a distinctly old-fashioned view of biology, in other words, and it is odd to see it being pursued with such vigour in an era when modern theories of chaos and complexity might dictate a different interpretation of our history. Perhaps it's inherent in material such as this: if one posits a race of star-travelling superbeings who seeded the universe with life in the hugely distant past – which is not a particularly new idea, Ursula Le Guin's 'Hainish' stories had a similar background – then one has to smuggle in a 'directed' view of evolution if the resulting species are ever to exchange gifts beneath an alien sun and develop a universal language to understand each other better. If Brin does restate the wolfing solution, it may be in explicit contradiction to these implications – which could open up vertiginous perspectives for future novels in the 'Uplift' series as (I speculate) the search for the Progenitors, and in particular for the knowledge of how they managed to seize control of evolution in the first place, steps up a gear or two.

Nevertheless, one wishes that *Brightness Reef* addressed the issue from a more adult perspective than it actually does. Like an increasing number of novels of this 'galaxy-spanning' type – Vernor Vinge's *A Fire Upon the Deep* is another recent example – many of the viewpoint characters are children or teenagers, which fatally undermines any attempt at a detailed exploration of these evolutionary questions. There is a certain case to be made that, as these young people learn more about themselves and their world, so the reader learns through them; but if Brin is at all serious about these questions then he has to address them through a cast of adult characters. The one genuine adult character, a linguist, has interesting speculations to make about the role and development of language in the transmission of culture and the construction of civilisation, but her arguments are lost in some nonsense about the Path of Redemption – which seems to involve throwing away your technology and hoping to become de-evolved, so that you win a second chance at the stars. And there is plot-strand after plot-strand of action-adventure chasing about, some of them involving aliens (which are the usual made-over humans in funny costumes) and some of them involving juvenile aliens, which are embarrassing. Compounding this, some of the characters have a habit of modelling their behaviour on the characters in the novels brought to Jijo by humans, many of which appear to be twentieth century science fiction novels. The suggestion that, millennia from now, people (and aliens) will still be reading Arthur C. Clarke's *The City and the Stars* – admittedly never directly referred to, but responsible for an entire plot-strand – is so daft as to be not worth considering further.

In summary, then, there are some good ideas buried in *Brightness Reef*, and even in the 'Uplift' series as a whole; but the execution which would give them the weight they deserve is lacking. One just hopes that the teenage characters mature quickly between now and the next volume.

David Brin's *The Uplift War* is reviewed on page 26

Terry Brooks

First King of Shannara

Legend, 1996, 490pp, £16.99

Reviewed by Vikki Lee

Following in the commercially successful footsteps of David Eddings, Terry Brooks tries his hand at continuing his Shannara series... backwards. *First King of Shannara* is described on the cover as 'the prequel to his best-selling Shannara series', and although that alone will guarantee sales to his legions of devoted fans, I was keen to find out if it is as good as the original Shannara series, or more like the less successful *Heritage of Shannara* quartet.

In the aftermath of the 'First War of the Races', the Druids of Paranor retreat into their collective shells and return to studying the old sciences – shunning the use of magic. Only

the ancient Druid, Bremen and a few trusted, assorted cohorts have continued to seek knowledge of the powers they feel should not be forsaken.

Bremen has journeyed far into the north and discovered that, once again, the four races are threatened by the machinations of the Dark Lord, Brona, himself an outcast of Paranor since the last war. Along with his trusted friend and tracker, Kinson, Bremen travels to the Valley of Shale to consult with the spirits of the dead. There, at no little personal cost, Bremen is granted four suitably cryptic visions of what will come to pass should Brona not be stopped in his tracks. Understanding the threat, Bremen returns to Paranor to enlist the help of the Druids but is disbelieved and sent packing. He is left with only three Druids who trust him and vow to help: Tay Trefenydd, of Elven origin; the dwarf Risca; the human girl Mareth; and Kinson.

Risca sets off to warn the Dwarves and prepare them for battle; Tay travels west to persuade the Elven King to support the dwarves and search for the Black Elfstone, a magical stone that must be kept from falling into Brona's hands at all costs. Bremen, Mareth and Kinson, return to Paranor with heavy heart and attempt to learn the truth of the first of Bremen's visions: the total destruction of Paranor.

Not having read Terry Brooks's more recent offerings, it took me some little time to get back into a world I enjoyed in the mid-eighties; his Tolkienesque blend of Elves, Dwarves, Trolls and Gnomes, probably belongs more in the eighties than the nineties. Brooks draws characters that you actually find

yourself caring about: I felt so tired for Bremen, tramping backwards and forwards across the land, that I wanted the old science to provide a Mountain Bike just to take the weight off his poor old legs. *First King of Shannara* is, after all, a traditional Dark vs Light quest story, but Brooks is one of the few authors nowadays who can tread a well worn path and still keep you interested and entertained along the way.

I was rather pleased that *First King of Shannara* turned out to be vintage, rather than modern Brooks. I hope in a way, that this is the last Shannara novel he ever writes – it would be nice for the Shannara series to end on a high note.

Deborah Christian *Mainline TOR, 1996, 383pp, \$23.95*

Reviewed by K.V. Bailey

This is a debut novel which at first glance seems to cover only familiar ground, but which gains stature as it progresses. This is chiefly due to the author's ability to give her readers lively experiences of what it's like to be moving across vibrational barriers, switching timelines or being stranded in a spatio-temporal limbo. The familiar ground comprises interplanetary zippings-around, the combats jacked-in cyber antagonists, mutant prodigies, biological adaptations to alien environments and a profusion of the kinds of gadgets and strategies which go with Bond-style adventures. We have certainly been there before, but here is someone who tells a story crisply and enables her readers to live with her characters through even the most extravagant happenings. This makes all the difference.

To illustrate briefly, here is a snippet from chapter nineteen: the subject is Vask, the wild-talented Fixer who is able to achieve both insubstantiality and invisibility by modifying his molecular structure in such a way that 'every particle, every elemental chain that composed the man on the physical plane shifted its vibratory frequency ever so slightly up-spectrum.' (Techno-babble this may be, but an acceptable bid for suspended disbelief.)

He walked in a foggy half-world where mist-soft objects glowed with a blue-grey luminescence born of radiant molecular energy. He approached the shadowy gate of Tyree Longhouse and moved through the incorporeal structure of the bars. As he pushed through, he felt a crawling sensation in the path of the earthly material. It was not a horrific feeling; neither was it pleasant. He gathered his nerve before pushing through the door of the longhouse in the same manner.

Wells's *Invisible Man* may be a subtler psychological/symbolic creation, but is nowhere portrayed to better kinaesthetic effect. Similarly, Reva, Deborah Christian's central protagonist, has the psi-talent of being able to change Lines (that is, time-lines), a trick of obvious benefit to a professional assassin. The author does not, however, treat this as routine plot machinery, but manages to convey something of the eeriness of shadowy situations where what lies before and after appears to be determined or, alternatively, open to manipulation. At such points, as she says, 'you have to make a choice about which way to go, which reality to live in. And if you make too many wrong choices, there's no telling where you may end up.'

Fluctuating margins of reality also characterise the territories inhabited by FlashMan, a for-hire net-runner (the name is appropriate in that his cyber-manifestation is often lightning-like, but it sounds associatively odd to UK ears). His on-line exploits are jargonishly described but, again, are dynamically involving. For example when FlashMan and Nomad, a security forces' hacker, form a temporary partnership to crack the HQ defences of the ubiquitous Red Hand crime organisation. In virtual mode, after evading by a sim-form clone manoeuvre the onslaught of a pantherish ICE killer,

the pair ran a swift reconnoiter of in-house command systems, down corridors and piggyback on data streams... [to where] on a dais a fiber bundle ascended to virtual heaven, the direct link to something physical – a deck, perhaps, or a command console of some sort.

Reva, Vask, FlashMan and other characters are tied into complex criminal and anti-criminal operations on the domed and aquafarmed oceanic planet Selmun III where big business is smuggling. One runner, the femininely intuitive and impulsive Lish, is freelance; her rival, Kuruu, is controlled from off-planet by the Red Hand. Reva, time-jumping hit-woman, is employed so variously that her codes of commitment and her emotions (wakened by her relationship with Lish) get seriously at odds. Her future and ethical attitudes are left undetermined at the conclusion – hinting at a sequel? The most thrilling plotstrand is the smuggling into Selmun III from the planet Tion of the borgbeasts, huge bio-engineered sea creatures intended as weapons in the war waged by the indigenous underwater R'debh people against their exploiters, a task – ultimately facilitated by FlashMan – a little reminiscent of the whale transportation in Star Trek's *The Voyage Home*, but on a vaster scale. There, as with the 'Ghost-ray' and the giant alien bounty hunter Yavobo, bigness is characteristic. Projects, action, distances, depths are all on the large scale; but it is not so much the macro-features of this novel that lastingly engage the imagination as the micro-shiftings of form and the streamings and uncertainties of sentence.

**Arthur C. Clarke
& Mike McQuay**

Reviewed by L.J. Hurst

Richter 10

Gollancz, 1996, 341pp, £15.99

The first reference work I looked at said that the Richter Scale went from 1 to 9, and for a couple of days I thought that *Richter 10* must be putting itself in the realms of science fantasy. But another book told me that the scale ends with 10 (although the greatest intensity ever recorded was 9.5 in Iran in 1972), reinstating its scientific credentials. The scale does not measure destruction – although that is a concomitant – but the amplitude and frequency of the surface waves. Local intensity is measured on the Mercalli Intensity Scale, which runs from I to XII. Oddly enough for a novel about a seismologist who wins the Nobel Prize for his researches, I didn't learn any of this from *Richter 10*, and I think I should have been told. My encyclopedia is ten years old, but Doctor Richter was still alive in 1985 – it does not mention Signor Mercalli – if it was still possible I'd like to know their opinions of this book.

But to begin at the beginning: in his Introduction Arthur C. Clarke describes how, watching the Los Angeles earthquake of January 1994, he conceived and wrote quickly an 850 word movie outline. He wanted no more involvement – and his agent turned it not into a movie, but into a novel written completely by Mike McQuay. Here it is, with Clarke's Introduction, and his Outline as an Appendix. Mike McQuay died soon after completing this, having written (according to the dust jacket) thirty-five novels, including *Memoria* which won the Philip K. Dick Award in 1988 – though most of his work seems to have been in pseudonymous series, such as the Nancy Drew Mysteries.

What McQuay was given in the Outline was a series of events in the life of Lewis Crane as Crane predicts more and more serious earthquakes. The book thus becomes a set of scenes, with some characters and themes common to each – which makes it a bit like 2001: *A Space Odyssey*. However, Crane has a personal life and a sidekick who turns out to be anлаго-figure; here McQuay adds a massive sub-text. In his future, Israel has destroyed itself and all the Middle East in a last Masada-like suicide with atomic bombs, while in North America the Nation of Islam has absorbed almost all of the Black population. Daniel Newcombe, Crane's assistant, is a Black academic drawn into the Nation of Islam who, through his annoyance at losing his girl to Crane, becomes ready to sabotage the anti-earthquake project.

Meanwhile North America is run by two rival Asian companies who place their stooges in the White House. Crane is exceptionally unfortunate in that the latest president is a

Chinese transsexual who wants to keep her gender secret, and so is easily subject to blackmail and manipulation. On the other hand, Crane is lucky enough to be able to offer bets to the whole world on when the next earthquake will occur, win, and so become a billionaire who can continue to pay for his own experiments.

This book mixes massive physical changes with power-dealing politics – but none of the characters are fit to deal with them. Although Clarke never met McQuay, what McQuay has done is what Clarke and Gentry Lee did in *Rama II* – put together the most ill-fitted group possible and make them representatives of humanity having to face an enormous challenge. As in *Rama II*, of course, these people are not up to it and the story suffers.

So, look at these enormous rival groups: the rich scientist, the Nation of Islam, the gangster companies – all their rivalry comes down to... personal confrontations with Crane. No one ever seems to suggest that the threats facing them all (and everyone has to cover themselves against skin cancer because the Israeli bombs destroyed the ozone layer, did I mention that?) should cause humanity to unite. Equally, Crane's response to all this is personal, too. When he marries, he arranges for it to be done in the Himalayas: 'And today, this very afternoon, there would be the first quake since 1255 in this region... Only Crane would choose this day, this place for their wedding. It was perfect.'

Clarke's outline mentions religious cultists, who want things left to God. He does not mention the Nation of Islam, but McQuay has added other details about their fundamentalism. So, they are opposed to earthquake research or the attempts to prevent quakes, and when they occupy the southern states after the mid-west and the Mississippi are devastated, they farm on an almost organic scale; yet they are not averse to other technology: Mohammed Ishmael, their leader, doesn't attend meetings himself, he sends a hologram. No other character seems to suggest, nor does the author, that this is hypocritical. In fact, the tone of the whole of the book is morally neutral. Newcombe goes to prison at the end because Crane's son dies in the sabotage attempt – but Newcombe is not presented as a worse person. Crane's wife-to-be wants to marry him – I didn't find him very attractive. He may be trying to save the world in his way, a less destructive way than Sumi Chan or Mohammed Ishmael, but he mixes with those characters quite easily.

However, this book offers a challenge of another kind for potential authors. Read Clarke's Introduction and Outline first; go away and plan how you would do it. Then read McQuay's novel. Afterwards, compare what he did with your notes and ask yourself: did he do justice to the story he had to tell? It could be a rewarding exercise.

Fred Clarke

Four Heads in the Air

Rocket Publishing, 1995, 91pp, £4.95

Reviewed by Maureen Speller

There is a school of thought which claims that a writer's life has no place in his fiction: indeed, numerous literary figures have done their utmost to dodge the unwelcome attentions of biographers. On the other hand, people are undeniably fascinated by stories of their favourite author's formative years, and if the biographer is a sibling, the fascination increases.

However, Fred Clarke's *Four Heads in the Air* is more than simply a memoir of brother Arthur's childhood. It is an account of the early years of all four Clarke children, Arthur, Fred, Nora and Michael, between the two World Wars, and their mother's efforts to keep Ballifants Farm going despite her husband's failing health and his early death. Money was always short and while they never went hungry, the children were

obliged to take a share of work on the farm and life was not always as carefree as a child might hope. Nevertheless, it is clear that the Clarke children remember those years with affection, and that they were each touched by their mother's indomitable spirit.

Inevitably, of most interest to science fiction readers are the vignettes of the young Arthur C. Clarke, constructing crystal radio sets for friends at half-a-crown each, wiring the farm with its own personal telephone system, constructing a Meccano stand for his telescope, and always with a book about his person, whether breaking stones for the new trackway or cooling off in the stream during a summer heatwave. Nevertheless, Fred Clarke's own memories of country life are entertaining, whether he's singing in the choir or delivering telegrams for his aunt or, in league with his older brother, burning hornets out of a tree. And it cannot be denied that his reminiscences provide an unusual slant on the life of one of our foremost writers!

Nancy A. Collins, Edward E. Kramer & Martin H. Greenberg (Eds) *Dark Love*

Hodder & Stoughton, 1996, 402pp, £9.99

Stephen Jones & David Sutton (Eds) *Dark Terrors*

Gollancz, 1995, 379pp, £15.99

Reviewed by Stephen Payne.

Two collections, 42 horror stories, both carrying 'Dark' in their title. *Dark Terrors* kicks off (or maybe that should be 'boots up') with 'More Tomorrow' by Michael Marshall Smith, a paranoid little tale of the Internet and the information, in this case a series of photographs, that might be posted there. It is a very effective, extremely unsettling piece and no doubt reflects the editors' interest in stories with a contemporary theme. And they are interested in contemporary themes: in 'Sampled', Steve Rascine Tem considers the sounds a death-metal band might sample to create their music (though depending somewhat on the illusion of the rock 'n' roll lifestyle) and in 'Where the Bodies Are Buried 3: Black and White and Red All Over', Kim Newman rekindles society's ongoing concerns for the effects of 'video nasties' and censorship generally. It is Newman's usual liberal rally against the excesses and intolerance of the media, but is a sophisticated argument, nonetheless. A series of killings appear to emulate the murders in a cheap horror video (of the story's title), so the video is banned. But the killings continue unabated, so the crime scenes are fitted-up by the media and the Police to make it appear as if the video is still to blame. The story is not particularly scary and I suspect that Newman is really interested in the way society attributes blame, as if a human being's motivation is as easily programmed as a video recorder. Also worthy of note is 'Splatter of Black' by Charles A. Grimlich, a grim war story

that follows a mercenary, armed to the teeth with automatic weapons, out to rescue the damsel in distress from a bunch of shape-changing monsters. There are a few fillers and oddities here, notably 'I've Come To Talk With You Again' by Karl Edward Wagner and an old Ramsey Campbell story, 'The Puppets', which I would loosely describe as gothic, but overall the collection feels very well balanced.

Dark Love is much narrower in its cast and the majority of the stories lack any fantastic elements at all. The remit seems to be sex, sex and violence, and sexual violence (take this as a warning) and the collection is very much concerned with the untethered mind of the serial killer. However the lead story, 'Lunch at The Gotham Cafe' by Stephen King, shows some originality as it traces a deserted husband agreeing to one last desperate meeting with his estranged wife and her professional help at a cafe where... Well, I won't say. This is a very odd story, very powerful, and not at all what I expected. It is the exception though, and the chasing pack do tend to blend into one another. Which is a shame as there are some good pieces knocking around, like 'Ro Erg' by Robert Weinberg, the tale of a sort of latterday Jekyll and Hyde; 'The Penitent' by John Peyton Cooke, an extreme and upsetting tale of self-mutilation and sado-masochism; and 'Barbara' by John Shirley, where an affluent, middle-class, white woman finds redemption in murder and robbery (and as with many of these stories, the plot hinges on an unfaithful partner). For once, the best, or at least the most disturbing, is saved to last. 'Loop' by Douglas Winter is little more than a narrative that trails one man's journey into pornography; a journey that potentially lies within us all. Winter dares to take us inside the sexuality of a man, dares to ask the questions that we are too scared to ask and too scared to answer. If there is horror here, he is saying, then it is in understanding one thing: ourselves.

Glen Cook

Bleak Seasons

Tor, 1996, 316pp, \$22.95

Raymond E. Feist

Rise of a Merchant Prince

Morrow, 1995, 406pp, \$23.00

Reviewed by Jon Wallace

Every novel has a lead character (or characters, I suppose) whose job is to give the readers someone to identify with, or care about, or at least to give them a thread to follow.

In *Bleak Seasons* this is Murgan, Standard-bearer of the Black Company, member of the Old Crew, the few original members of the Company left. The Sixth Chronicle of the Black Company was written five years after the publication of the last volume, *Dreams of Steel*. Luckily, Cook has written this novel in such a way that it is not necessary to read the earlier ones.

That is a good thing about *Rise of a Merchant Prince* also. The plot, while relying on the first volume of the *Serpentwar*, doesn't do it so heavily that you have to have read *Shadows of a Dark Queen*. Just as well really, because I don't think that I'd like to have to go back and read the earlier volume, not on the strength of this one. Don't get me wrong, this book has its strengths, but they are outweighed by the weaknesses.

In *Roo Avery*, Feist has created a hero who is easy to dislike. Oh, I'm sure Feist thinks that he's just a bit of a rogue who redeems himself towards the end, but I didn't find anything to like about him. The contrast between Roo and Murgan is marked. Murgan has no pretensions, he is as he appears to be, a war-trained mercenary who is loyal to his friends and leaders, and who is smart enough to be respected by them in return; Roo Avery is a grasping, selfish barely-principled adventurer.

The plotlines too are very different. In *Bleak Seasons*, Murgan tells the story of the siege of Dejaqore by the forces of the Shadowmasters and the re-appearance of the Lady and Croaker,

the semi-mythical leaders of the Black Company, thought to have been killed on the plains in front of the city. Cook flings us back and forward as Murgan's consciousness hunts through the events that have led to the present situation. We are given enough clues to the past events that they are easily deciphered. The reader is forced to think and pay close attention to the twists and turns of the plots and diversions encountered by the Company and their allies. This is a book where magic and the supernatural vie with a hard-bitten military style which I associate with the US Marines. For all that, the magic lives. It is taken for granted by all the characters, it is used and respected as part of the lives they live.

Rise of a Merchant Prince is the story of the - erm - rise of Roo Avery, from the position of lowly pardoned murderer to the head of a trading conglomerate headed for the top. It starts with a band of intrepid adventurers, survivors of a great battle against the forces of the Emerald Queen across the sea, but it becomes apparent that the enemy have not been defeated, only slowed down... Which is where things slowed down for me. The company splits into those who re-enlist, like Roo's childhood companion, Erik von Darkmoor, and those like Roo who leave the army. Roo, in particular, decides that what he really wants is to be rich; and this book lost my interest. Roo's subsequent dedication to making a profit from the greed and misfortune of others is abhorrent to me.

When the book follows the fortunes of von Darkmoor in the army and Nakor and his disciple on Sorcerer's Isle to drum up support for the war effort, it was more interesting to me. I would have liked more about them and less about Roo Avery's machinations and his casual disregard for the feelings of those around him. There are also elements of the supernatural in this novel but it is there in a remote way, it plays no part in the day to day life of the people of the towns and villages.

Of these two on-going series, I would perhaps buy the next Black Company book, but I couldn't sustain enough interest in the *Serpentwar* Saga to be bothered about what happens next.

Ellen Datlow & Terri Ruby Slippers, Golden Tears Windling (eds)
Avonova, 1995, 416pp, \$22.00

Reviewed by Cherith Baldry

This is the third collection of reworked fairy stories put together by these editors, after *Snow White, Blood Red and Black Thorn*, *White Rose*. If you have read the earlier collection, then you don't need this review; you'll probably go straight out and buy this new volume, if you haven't already done so.

New readers, start here. The editors' introduction about the nature of fairy tale material rescues it from the nursery; these stories are not just for children, but for everyone. They make the point that writers of fairy stories are working in a long-established tradition and outline some of the history, showing that the forms in which fairy tales are most familiar to us now are often relatively recent versions of ancient stories that appear in many cultures, writers like Perrault and collectors like the Brothers Grimm had a large body of work from the oral tradition to draw on.

So these writers are not using original ideas: Datlow and Windling quote Angela Carter, herself an eminent writer of fairy tales, in comparing the art to the individual interpretation of a well-known recipe: 'This is how I make potato soup.' The originality in these stories comes from how the writers have brought their own interests, insights and language to bear on their basic material, and in so doing have created something personal and unique. In the words of the editors: '...with this common straw they make gold, and language is the wheel on which they spin.'

With this in mind, one of the main points of interest about the book is to compare the contrasting treatments that different writers give to the same story. The fairy tales vary from those we grew up with - 'Sleeping Beauty' and 'Rumpelstiltskin' among others - to material from the Far East, Russia and Native American culture, as well as versions of more modern stories like 'The Wizard of Oz' and Hans

Andersen's 'The Little Match Girl'. The story that appears most is probably 'Sleeping Beauty' which turns up in both a traditional and a late-twentieth century setting, as well as in a poem which looks at the Holocaust in a way that recalls Jane Yolen's novel, *Briar Rose*. (Though most of the contributions are stories, there are a few poems.) There's a contrasting pair of stories about the changeling child: 'The Printer's Daughter' by Delia Sherman, set in Elizabethan England, and a science fiction story by Jane Yolen, 'The Traveler and the Tale', which perhaps more than any other piece in the book underlines the power and the importance of story.

Two of the stories that impressed me most were Tanith Lee's 'The Beast' and Nancy Kress's 'Summer Wind', both of which turn the original stories round to look at them from a completely new angle. The Kress in particular is a beautifully atmospheric piece of writing, filled with a piercing sadness. I also enjoyed very much John Brunner's 'The Emperor Who Had Never Seen a Dragon', a Chinese tale with a background evoked in meticulous detail as well as the transient but unforgettable dragon of the title.

The book isn't all high drama or high fantasy. There's macabre humour in Gahan Wilson's 'Hansel and Gretel' and Gene Wolfe's wry version of the Russian 'The Death of Koshchei the Deathless', and humour of a more basic kind in 'Roach in Loafers' by Roberta Lannes and 'Billy Fearless' by Nancy A. Collins; both of these stories transport their original plots and characters into strikingly different backgrounds and succeed brilliantly.

I didn't like every story in the book, but then the range is so wide that I wouldn't expect to. To say there's something for everyone might suggest the contents are inoffensively bland, but this would be a mistake. There's something for everyone because the stories contrast so strikingly and challenge in so many different ways. There's also a list of further reading for enthusiasts and on top of all this it's a beautifully produced book; what more could you ask?

Christopher Fowler

Psychoville

Warner Books, 1995, 417pp, £7.99

Reviewed by John Newsinger

There are only a few contemporary authors whose work I regularly read as it comes out: Kim Stanley Robinson, Paul J. McAuley, Ian McDonald, Iain Banks... and Christopher Fowler. Ever since *Roofworld* I have been an admirer of his work, and each successive novel has increased my liking. But what of *Psychoville*, a contemporary horror story spanning the decade 1985 to 1995? Does it maintain the standard of his earlier books? Only partly.

Psychoville is about class, about the wounds inflicted by the class system and, of course, about vengeance. It tells the story of Billy March, a young boy whose working class family are resettled outside London in well-to-do middle class Invicta Cross. It is 1985: the March family find life increasingly difficult, struggling desperately to keep their heads above water, but failing. Their middle class neighbours look down their noses at them, are at best unsympathetic, at worst positively hostile. Young Billy becomes convinced that his family's misfortunes are not just bad luck, but the result of a conspiracy to drive them out. There is plenty of circumstantial evidence to support this view.

This first section of the novel is excellent. Fowler really has a good grasp of the hidden injuries inflicted by the class system. His exploration of how snobbish, narrow-minded, callous and greedy the English middle class can be is very well done. The

failure of Rob March and his wife, Angela, to withstand the misfortune and the hostility they encounter in Invicta Cross is convincingly recounted. The family disintegrates with their tragedy culminating in Angela's death and Ray and Billy's flight back to London.

Billy's own experience of life among the middle class is similarly grim. Isolated, despised, bullied, his only friends were Oliver, the disturbed son of the local undertaker, and April, the even more disturbed daughter of a local recluse. This embattled group pay the price of their difference, of their inability to conform.

But enough of this misery. It is now 1995, ten years later; as the narrator tells us, we have 'ploughed through that ghastly catalogue of woes' and now he is sure we want to see 'Billy choke the remorse from his tormentors' throats.' Vengeance is coming and about bloody time.

For me, the second half of *Psychoville* is a bit of a let down, however. Fowler does not, in fact, give us a full-blooded unrestrained avenging angel armed with the sword of justice and wreaking havoc among the wrongdoers. People are horribly murdered, but the adults who return to exact retribution lose the sympathy they had as children even before Fowler springs the book's big surprise. I was actually beginning to feel sorry for at least some of the unfortunate inhabitants of Invicta Cross; either Fowler lost his nerve or he was trying to be too clever.

What starts out as a very powerful novel runs into the sand towards the end. Still, *Psychoville* is very much worth reading; unfortunately, the single-minded nastiness of, say, Iain Banks's

Complicity is just not there.

One last point: is there a trend here? Are we in for a flood of novels where the victims of the Thatcher-Major nightmare inflict retribution on its beneficiaries? The chickens of

increasing inequality, insecurity and poverty coming home at long last like so many vampire bats. I certainly hope so; vengeance has always been more satisfying than political correctness.

Richard Garfinkle

Celestial Matters

TOR, 1996, 348pp, \$23.95

Reviewed by Steve Jeffery

The blurb of Richard Garfinkle's first sf novel rather engagingly describes this as 'ancient hard SF', opening a whole new sub genre of alternate history sf. Or it might, if you couldn't, with equal justification, argue the same of the Hermetic playground of Mary Gentle's 'White Crow' stories. It's a nice conceit: what if the scientific worldview of hundreds, or even thousands of years ago had been right, and the Universe worked and moved as they supposed? Garfinkle takes us right back to the Ptolemaic universe of the ancient Greeks. In this Universe, the moon, sun and planets are fixed to crystalline celestial spheres as they orbit a fixed central Earth, and the aether in between is filled with rarefied, breathable air – how would the Sun burn otherwise? Travel between the planets is thus a matter of harnessing the natural properties of matter inherent in the elements of fire, earth, air and water, and the proper motions of celestial matter, allied to Pythagorean science and navigation.

On Earth, the empires of Greece and the Middle Kingdom have been locked in a war for nine centuries, extending from the borders of Tibet to the Mississippi of North America. Neither side can break the stalemate, grounded on mutual incomprehension of the science and technology behind the weaponry of the other. Against the firegold and rarefied air evocative throwers of the Greek Delian League are the kites and mysterious Xi lances of the Middlers. Now this is about to change. Aias, graduate of the Athenian Akademie and scientific commander of the Chandra's Tear, carved entire from a mile-

long chunk of moon matter, is to lead Project Sunthief which aims to capture a portion of the sun itself and drop it on the Middler capital of 'AngXao.

The project is ill fated from the start. Aias, taking leave while Chandra's Tear is being refitted, is attacked and nearly killed in a Middler attack on a ship between Tyre and Athens, well inside the Delian League. He is assigned a Spartan commando as a bodyguard, a North Atlantean Xeroki named Yellow Hare. The launch of Chandra's Tear is brought forward by the Archons of Delos, with the final components of Project Sunthief being assembled in flight. On the far side of the orbit of the Moon, they are attacked again by Middler kites. A spy and saboteur may be aboard. The twin scientific and military command of the Chandra's Tear breaks down in suspicion, recrimination and outright mutiny as the damaged ship continues out through the planets and celestial spheres to the sun.

This has to be one of the oddest interplanetary adventures since Bob Shaw's *The Ragged Astronauts*. It's quite absorbing and fast paced, despite the rather two-dimensional characters who never fully move outside their assigned roles: Spartan duty and honour, scientific resourcefulness, and the deviousness and inscrutability of foreigners. And the ending is telegraphed, almost from the discovery of the real saboteurs of the ill-fated mission. Aside from its intriguing central premise, this reads like a curiously old fashioned, indeed dated, type of sf adventure, rather like *Star Trek* in togas. It's engaging, and quite likable, and has its moments (and also, it has to be said, its moments of stodgy portentousness), but its lack of real characters, complete absence of any subplot, and straightforward single-viewpoint storyline are not really where the rest of sf is in the 90s.

David Gemmell

The Legend of Deathwalker

Bantam Press, 1996, 334pp, £15.99

Reviewed by Andy Mills

Another volume in the Druss cycle by the high priest of heroic fantasy, this is a rollicking adventure story. Hackneyed, to be sure, yet most enjoyable – even if, like that ubiquitous Chinese feast, it fills you up at the time but leaves you hungry not long after finishing the meal.

Druss is an old warrior standing atop the walls of the fortress Dros Delnoch. With the other defenders he awaits the next onslaught of the Nadir fighters, led by the warlord Ulric. In order to calm a frightened new recruit he tells the boy of a previous siege, one where he fought alongside the Nadir. It is this tale, set thirty years in the past, which Gemmell tells.

Druss is in the Gothir capital of Gulgothir for the Games when Klay, his opponent, is mortally wounded in an alehouse attack mounted against Druss. Druss is told of the Eyes of Alchazzar, fabulous jewels which will heal Klay. The stones are supposed to be hidden in the sacred Nadir shrine of Oshikai Demon-bane, but the young Nadir called Talisman (whose life Druss has just saved) is also after the McGuffin; crucially, so are two thousand highly trained Gothir troops, led by the fanatical Gargan. Talisman has killed Gargan's son; as may be guessed, Gargan is not exactly chuffed about this. There are numerous sub-plots concerning Nadir shamen, the fate of Oshikai and his sorceress, Druss's poet companion, Sieben, and

the latter's new-found love (these two are the refreshing light voices in the book), and a host of supporting characters. All these lead towards an epic siege in which Druss and a couple of hundred assorted tribesmen defend the shrine against the Gothir, and which earns the big warrior the sobriquet of Deathwalker. The siege itself is suitably spectacular, though the use of a *deus ex machina* to bring it to a conclusion is a disappointment.

From the clichéd opening words ('The moon hung like a sickle blade over Dros Delnoch ...') you will guess – rightly – that there is nothing new to be found here. Gemmell's book has no pretensions to innovation. This is heroic fantasy in the Howard tradition, with everything that entails: valorous warriors, wily shamen, beautiful women, sly politicians, mad leaders. Gemmell glories in the honour of men fighting for a just cause, though he balances that with a gritty attitude to death and injury and to man's inhumanity to his fellow man. There is here a mature realisation of the meaning of 'just causes'; the irony of the final Dros Delnoch segment, which pits Druss against the very Nadir he set on the road to unity and power, exemplifies this. It certainly gives the book a darker, wearier tone which helps make up for its deficiencies.

Fans of the genre will not be disappointed by *The Legend of Deathwalker*. Those who, like myself, only occasionally sample its wares will find that Gemmell's honed skills set this book above the mass of undistinguished works with which fantasy is awash.

David Gemmell *The Complete Chronicles of the Jerusalem Man* Legend, 1995, 912pp, £15.99, £9.99 pb
Reviewed by Steve Jeffery

Jerusalem Man collects in a chunky omnibus edition the three novels that feature David Gemmell's seemingly indestructible hero, Jon Shannow. Hero or anti-hero? I must admit that at the end of these three books, *Wolf in Shadow*, *The Last Guardian* and *Bloodstone*, I am less sure about whether you are meant to admire, or flinch from, Shannow than when I started.

Shannow is a man of violence, in a time of violence. *Wolf in Shadow* starts in a post-apocalyptic world, some three hundred years after the Fall, which has reverted to the level of the frontier wild west. Shannow's survival rests in his guns and his reputation, while his sanity, rather more questionably, rests in his faith in his Bible and his dream of the lost city of Jerusalem.

So what makes this a fantasy rather than a post-modern western? In this world there are stones, Daniel Stones or Sipstrassi, that come from a world long before the Fall. So long ago, in fact, that the world has fallen not once, but twice, and these stones are remnants of a civilisation once known as Atlantis. The Stones have the power to heal, to confer health and immortality, but they can be corrupted by blood, and then become almost parasitic in their requirement for ever more blood to sustain their power. With sufficient charge, the Stones can form a link between the three worlds, opening gateways across time. From this ability are derived many of the plot threads and the large, sometimes confusing, cast of characters that cross and recross through the three books, and three worlds, of *The Jerusalem Man*. At times Shannow is reminiscent of Moorock's Elric: an archetypal champion tortured by a past guilt (the accidental killing of a young boy). At other times he is the Man with No Name from Clint Eastwood's mystical revenge western *High Plains Drifter*, or even Arthur, the once and future king with his Grail dream. Against him are the ungodly: brigands, rapists, thieves and men corrupted by power and greed. And against all are arrayed, literally, the armies of Satan, the Hellborn.

A large part of the popularity of Gemmell's fantasies, I suspect, derives from this multi-layering, almost overloading, of deliberately archetypal and mythic elements. This is particularly evident in the Jon Shannow novels. Gemmell plumbs widely, if not too deeply, across a whole range of cultural trigger points, which borrow freely from history, genre fiction, popular culture and Biblical and New Age mythologising. It could all get a bit much, indeed it sometimes does as you encounter Noah's Ark, the Titanic, Armageddon, ICBMs, time travel, beast men, the High Priests of Atlantis and a whole lot more besides. What holds it together is sheer storytelling pace; the action barely lets up for a moment as Gemmell constantly pulls new, unexpected, and sometimes outrageous, twists on the plot. There are occasional lapses, sometimes credulity is strained; *Bloodstone* relies a little too much towards the end on coincidence and 'cavalry over the hill' arrivals, and *The Last Guardian* starts with (as Gemmell freely admits) one of the most bare-faced opening sentences ever to grace a sequel.

But it is really the ambiguous figure of Shannow who dominates these novels. I think we are meant to be troubled by him, by his instant violence and sense of God-given right. For all that Shannow is a man of his time, where the meek, the weak and the vacillating quickly inherit the earth – all six foot of it – and strength and a sure aim are the only lasting qualities, we might empathise with but not wholly admire his brand of instant and summary vigilantism. It is *Bloodstone*, of all the three books, that most seems to recognise the danger in this, and sets Shannow against a distorted mirror of himself.

While Gemmell often stacks the odds (cruelty to animals or children is often a sure sign that you won't survive to the end of the book) some characters are allowed to redeem themselves by an act of selflessness. It's not always so clear cut. Amaziga is a thoroughly unforgiving, unlikeable character, prepared to sacrifice anybody, ultimately her own son, to regain her lost lover. But really, in the end, the difference between the quick and the dead still comes down to allowing one moment of greed or weakness.

Steven Gould *Wildside*
TOR, 1996, 316pp, \$22.95

Reviewed by Steve Palmer

The premise of Steven Gould's second novel is that an alternative Earth exists at the other end of a tunnel at the back of an American lot, and Earth where there are no people and hence there has been no exploitation of the land and its resources. Charlie, and eighteen-year-old kid, has found the tunnel and the other Earth, where he discovers bison, sabre-toothed tigers and some passenger pigeons – which he takes back to the real Earth.

Over the next few chapters Charlie tries to sell these pigeons to various institutions, involving four of his buddies along the way. An interesting scenario begins as the institutions try to work out where these extinct animals are coming from. Regrettably, this scenario is then completely ignored as the rest of the novels tells the tale of (i) adolescent in-fighting between

the kids, (ii) interminable flying trips across the plains of the other Earth, (iii) the kids' family problems, (iv) some more flying, complete with technical acronyms and conversions of kilometres to nautical miles, (v) the timid appearance of some plot as the institutions, the military, and probably the FBI, chase the kids, and (vi) some more flying, this time in a different plane.

This is not the most thrilling novel I have read. It is not a bad novel, but it is about as engaging as a photo-story in *Jackie* magazine. Maybe American teenagers will like it.

The five main characters have the fascinating property of being paradoxically different and identical. On the one hand they are different sexes, different races, have different attributes, different sexual orientations (what a surprise) and they speak differently. On the other hand any one of the five could be replaced by any other at any time: as I read the novel I found myself playing Zen Happy Families, mixing and matching the characters yet altering nothing.

Some of the dialogue is surreal: 'Move that, you ambulatory pot of glue!' 'How about a proof-of-concept demo?' 'Charlie! You okay?' She was crying. 'Shaken, not stirred.' I said.

Quite. Meanwhile our narrator, Charlie, is able to tell if a man is intelligent or not just by looking at him ('That guy from Sandia Labs looked pretty bright'), and a girl he is after has 'soft breasts, hard thighs' – blimey, what a combination! Particularly irritating is the excessive detail concerning how to fly aeroplanes. I really did not need to know that HALO stands

for High Altitude-Low Opening. Taking out the aerodynamics lessons, the descriptions of pre-flight and precisely how cold air gusts work near cliffs, would reduce the novel to two-thirds its current length.

I cannot recommend this novel, unless the reader is an American teenager, in which case it might hold some interest. But characters who feel their ears go red and are consequently grateful to be wearing headsets when told a friend is gay are not my cup of tea, thank you very much.

Ann Halam

The Fear Man

Orion, 1995, 135pp, £9.99

Reviewed by Helen McNabb

This book scared me. This is a good thing: it is meant to be a scary book, and although it is aimed at younger readers, it seems likely that it would scare them too. This is not a horror story, there is no blood and gore, nor violence and mayhem, but rather a subtle and skilful build up of suspense.

The first person narrator, Andrei, is a boy in his mid-teens, with a past which is a mystery to him as well as to the reader. He knows nothing about his own father, nor his mother's origins, but is well aware that his mother's behaviour is secretive and unusual. They have moved frequently, his mother seldom mixes outside the home and seems convinced that she is being pursued. Is she? Or is it paranoia? Andrei can see no signs of pursuit and his defence against the situation is not to ask questions. They had been 'normal' for a time, when his stepfather was alive, but after his stepfather's death the running and moving had begun again, with his younger sister Elsa, and brother Max added to the family unit. All Andrei wants is to be 'normal', to live in one place, go to one school, have friends

like Dita, know the neighbours, be a part of his community, and he hopes that in this place he will find it. His mother seems more sociable, but then strange things begin to happen. There is an empty house where a peculiar object appears and uncanny things happen at night until Elsa makes a 'spell' to protect them. Although he humours her, Andrei does not believe in her spell, but when he breaks it strange things begin to happen again.

What was Elsa's spell? Did it work or was it coincidence? What is the secret of the old house? The questions increase as events move on, forcing Andrei into action which eventually leads to his discovery of the answers to these and other questions.

The book is very well written, as one would expect from the pseudonymous Gwyneth Jones. The characters are completely believable; Andrei's wishes and dreams wake sympathetic reactions from the reader, and his relationships with his family and friend Dita are entirely natural. The gradual build up of suspense is excellent and the denouement exciting as well as satisfying. Although it is marketed as a children's book and so has less complexity and fewer layers than Gwyneth Jones' adult books, I would recommend it unhesitatingly to anyone wanting a good, well told, eminently readable story.

Peter F. Hamilton

The Reality Dysfunction

Macmillan, 1996, 954pp, £16.99

Reviewed by Gary Dalkin

Appearances deceive. This massive volume, packaged as a self-contained novel, is the first of The Night's Dawn trilogy. While what looks like the latest contender in the epic space opera stakes is also modern horror epic. *The Reality Dysfunction* has as much in common with similarly sized volumes from Stephen King and Clive Barker – in which a supernatural incursion is observed by a wide variety of characters – as anything from Banks, Baxter or Bear (though the later's *Psychone* does come to mind). In this case, discarnate intelligences from beyond threaten, not a single small town, but an entire Confederation of star systems.

2611: humanity has colonised 862 systems. This Confederation of settled worlds, biologically engineered space habitats and mined asteroids, which includes two splendidly realised alien races, operates on much the same benevolently capitalist principles of the England of Hamilton's Greg Mandel books. Major corporations dominate, the advantages trickle down to the lower orders, and there is always a margin for an independent starship captain. Also like the Mandel books, humans are often interfaced with their machinery/computers, here via 'neural nanonics', while the 'Edenists' go further, having engineered a form of telepathy through splicing into their DNA an 'affinity gene' and 'neuron symbionts'.

Lalonde is a first stage (i.e. agrarian) European Christian Ethnic colony world. The climate is tropical, conditions primitive. We follow the arrival of a new group of colonists from Earth as they journey upriver and carve homesteads from the rainforest. It is here that chance conspires to open a breach in reality. The aforementioned discarnate intelligences come through and possess the colonists. The possessed have extraordinary, largely destructive, physical powers, and gradually they threaten to engulf the Confederation.

There are several subplots: the re-emergence of a terrorist from the past, the existence of a starkilling weapon, investigations into technology recovered from the shattered remains of an alien Big Dumb Object, an undercover agent tracking illegal arms smugglers, the early career of an Edenist starship captain, the trading adventures of Joshua Calvert, the nominal hero. By the end of this volume the ramifications of these strands remain unresolved, so it is impossible to say how relevant they will become to the overall design, though here they often have the effect of slowing an already densely populated narrative to the unhurried meandering of Lalonde's snowlike clogged river, the Juliffe.

The world building is extraordinarily complex. There are a vast number of locations, organisations, starships, and

people to be introduced. While some of the characters are well drawn, there are dozens of others who are little more than names attached to government or military positions – and as we often leave them for hundreds of pages at a time, it becomes hard to even remember who everyone is, let alone care about their fate. Other characters are clichés – the priest who regains his strength through spiritual crisis, the hardbitten blonde journalist who will do anything (see *Rama II, Mars*) to climb the corporate ladder – or plain unlikeable. Joshua is obsessed with sex and money to the exclusion of virtually everything except saving his own skin. Ione Salanda, the female lead, is a less appealing reworking of Julia Evans of *Mindstar Rising*.

There is a serious problem with sex. Not only is there far too much of it – I began to imagine the book was so long because it wasn't going to end until everyone had had everyone else, at least once, if not half-a-dozen times in a zero gravity sex cage – the treatment is so gleefully adolescent. Not only does Joshua have almost every beautiful woman in the book, but three of them fall in love with him, and two he impregnates. One of these is a naive 16 year old heiress on a strict Christian planet, who will almost certainly be ruined by his behavior. The other also claims to be a Christian, but does so in the middle of casual sex, then she goes on to take further lovers and indulge in voyeurism. Yet there is no evidence that she is not entirely sincere – which suggests the author has a poor understanding of Christianity morality.

All this sex becomes distinctly tedious. Hamilton even seems to acknowledge this – on page 682: 'Sex, that's all you young people think off'; while on page 620 Ione says to Joshua, 'One glimpse of a female nipple and your fly seal bursts apart from the pressure. That's how complicated your personality is...' So if Hamilton knows, why not doing something about it?

Fortunately there is much to admire. Technology is extrapolated supremely well, and Lalonde, Norfolk and Tranquility are the most convincing of worlds. There are several excellent suspense/action sequences. The living voidhawk starships are thoughtfully realised, and striking images abound: 'Van Allen belts encircling the planet shone like sunlight striking an angel's wings'.

The central plot eventually ignites, though the most ingenious developments come rather late. Even so, the final 200 pages contain much to intrigue and hint that, now that the stage is set, the next volume will be much stronger. The fusion with horror is unusual, though it is far from clear whether the Reality Dysfunction is truly supernatural, and if we will be ultimately asked to suspend disbelief over what are fantastical elements in a hard SF setting, or a scientific explanation will rationalise and elevate the plot into more metaphysically complex regions.

I suspect that there is not quite the substance here for such a vast work. Compared to the best – *Anvil of Stars*, *Hyperion*, *Neverness*, *The Great and Secret Show* – there is not the imagination, moral argument, linguistic verve, the sheer excitement we have come to expect. Nevertheless, I will look forward to next year's *The Neutronium Alchemist*. Hamilton has set himself a formidable task, we must hope that the remaining two volumes demonstrate that he is equal to it.

Andrew Harman

The Scrying Game
Legend, 1996, 296pp, £16.99

Reviewed by Steve Palmer

There are difficulties with this ...

On the one hand, this is Andrew Harman's sixth book of amusing spoof fantasies, so he must be doing something right.

On the other hand, it's bloody hard to read.

The style could be described as soap-opera hysterical. So far as I can tell, there is not one single instance of the word 'said' following somebody's speech. Instead, on one randomly chosen page, we get: leered, grunted, choked, struggled, grunted, gaped, pointed, exploded, jeered, snapped, jibed, grinned, returned, growled.

This is all very well now and again for effect, but for a whole novel? After a while you just can't take any more. The style rips all emotional content from the characters' interactions, strongly suggesting an audience for whom emotional resonance is immaterial and for whom cartoon-like

behaviour is acceptable, page after page.

It isn't helped by the puns – of which there are many. Some are inspired (a crystal ball with Scry Movie Channel) but others are hopeless, there just for the sake of it. Do we really need a character called Mayor Culpa? Nor do I wish to read about a military type called Strappado. And I especially don't want to read about a place called Fort Knumm, which is both silly and pointless and not a particularly good pun.

As for the plot, this is good enough though quite manic. (If films were to be made of Andrew Harman's books, they would be on *Alive and Kicking* on Saturday mornings.) There's lots of action and no let-up of the pace.

When you are reviewing this sort of book you have to mention Terry Pratchett. On page 72 is a paragraph discussing the Chapter Dimensions: it is very much in the Pratchett style but serves as an excellent example of how not to do it. It sounds like waffle and ends with a lame joke.

In summary, this is a book aimed squarely at the specific market that can tolerate these quirks of style. Humour content: low. Likelihood of more being published: certain.

Russell Hoban

Fremder
Cape, 1996, 184pp, £14.99

Reviewed by Paul Kincaid

The narrator's name is Fremder Gorn. Fremder, as he happily tells us, is German for 'stranger'; and this stranger is certainly Gorn. Gorn like Alfred Bester's Gully Foyle, for as the book opens he is turning gently in space in the vast reaches of the Fourth Galaxy, without spaceship, without helmet, without

oxygen, without even his spacesuit. He should be dead. That he isn't, and the revelations brought about by his unlikely survival, is one of the threads that ties this wild, chaotic book together.

This is Russell Hoban playing with words, as he has done throughout his career. If the invention is not quite on the scale of the devolved language in *Riddley Walker*, it is still a book where words, their meanings, their assonances, their shapes count as much as what they actually say. There are song lyrics everywhere, much of the background to the story is revealed in

quotations from books and diaries, every scene is decorated with the advertising slogans and news headlines that are displayed there (and the language of these is as broken and decayed as the language of *Riddley Walker*). So it is important to know that Fremder is a stranger; but it is not so simple as being an everyman looking in on this future from the outside. No, Fremder is no stranger to this rotting, space-faring society, in fact he is, in a sense, as central to it as it is possible. Fremder is a stranger to himself – his mother died before he was born and he spent the final part of his gestation in an artificial womb, he never knew his father – and he is a stranger to humanity – Fremder spends the book moving from one casual sexual liaison to another, but the only two genuine relationships that occur in the book both fail. Fremder, from the isolation of the void, must discover himself.

Fremder's family were middle-European Jews, surviving the Nazi holocaust for a life of personal torment. Out of this milieu Fremder's mother, Helen, and her crippled brother, Isodor, indulge in strange experiments upon themselves. There is a theory that life is like a film, separate instants of being divided by moments of non-being like the separate frames of a film strip; only persistence of vision allows us to weave the whole into a seamless solidity. From this, Helen makes the crucial advance that will result in the flicker drive, a means of near-instantaneous travel from galaxy to galaxy. (If this curious notion has any resonance with more traditional works of science fiction, it is with Gully Foyle's 'jaunting' in *Tiger, Tiger*, the novel which, more than any other, keeps springing to mind as I read this book.)

Three threads twine about each other, twist into unlikely and unfathomable knots. There is the nightmarish

interrogation and its aftermath in which the powers that be try to discover how Fremder came to be floating in space – and what happened to the ship and crew with which he was supposed to be travelling? There is the story of Helen and Isodor, their experiments, their discoveries and their curious life. And there is the story of Fremder Gorn before the accident, a story which links everything together into a whole – not necessarily a satisfactory whole, there are loose ends, curious leaps of faith, narrative twists that seem designed more to throw the reader off than carry her along, but a whole none the less. It is more than ten years since Hoban wrote a novel that worked as a single coherent narrative (*Pilgrimage*, 1983), most of his work since then has consisted of short work or concatenations of short work (as *The Medusa Frequency*, 1987), and there are signs in *Fremder* that the larger work, the coherent whole, doesn't come easily to him. Nevertheless, though it might be disjointed and awkward in places, it is nevertheless a vigorous and invigorating sweep into the disconnected mind and uncertain identity that Hoban has been exploring since *The Lion of Boaz-Jachin and Jachin-Boaz* (1973).

As to whether, despite its setting in the next century, despite its journeys into other galaxies, despite its run-down urban futures and robots and AIs, this is really science fiction... Well there are gaffs – a science fiction writer would have talked of solar systems where Hoban uses galaxies – but not many. This reads like a book by someone aware of the genre, not necessarily deeply immersed in it but well enough aware of what is going on to be able to do a reasonable facsimile of the real thing. And few science fiction books written today can match the sheer joy in the strangeness of it all.

Paul Kearney

Hawkwood's Voyage

Gollancz, 1995, 382pp, £16.99

Reviewed by Mark Plummer

In 1453 the city of Constantinople fell to armies of the Ottoman Turks and the Eastern Roman Empire finally came to an end. In Western Europe, the Inquisition was just getting going and 39 years later Columbus sailed off into the sunset on a voyage that would eventually lead, after several hundred years, to the invention of McDonalds. None of these historic events feature in *Hawkwood's Voyage*. As such.

The year is 551 and we are in another world, on a continent which it might be convenient to think of as Absolutely Not Late Medieval Europe At All, Good Gracious No. The city of Aekir, where east meets west, is about to fall to the armies of the Merduks, a nation of surprisingly Middle Eastern aspect. Victory would be very important strategically, as the city is a gateway to the western states which would therefore be exposed to invasion by a ravaging hoard of heathens with broad ambitions in the direction of loot, plunder, and rape. As the defenders fall back from the doomed city, they fire the buildings (applying the age old principle that if they can't play with them, nobody else can either). In fact, when faced with the hordes of Merduks, setting fire to things seems a rather popular tactic among the westerners: heretics in particular have been found to be eminently combustible and in the country of Hebrion a fanatical religious order, the Inceptines, zealously seek them out. Nobody expects the Hebrionese Inceptines.

Meanwhile, John Hawkwood sails into the west with two ships stuffed to the gunwales with religious undesirables who have opted for a career in intercontinental exploration as an alternative to an invitation to an Inceptine barbecue. These 'religious undesirables' are the Dweomer folk, individuals possessing certain magical abilities. They are in search of a mythical continent in the far west and are guided only by the

log of an earlier expedition which returned with a crew of dead sailors and a 'something' that wasn't very pleasant.

The story swaps between Court intrigues as the secular authorities battle with the church and each other for ultimate supremacy, the front line where vastly outnumbered western troops prepare to try to beat off the ravaging hordes of Merduks in a seemingly unwinnable battle, and Hawkwood's expedition. In the end it's all a little inconclusive, as one might expect from anything proclaiming itself to be Book One of something. Perhaps the key thing is that whilst this may seem like a historical novel with the names changed and a few fantastic tropes thrown in, this is still a fantasy so we can't know for sure what's going to happen (this point was made in Robert J Killheffer's review of *The Lions of Al Rassan*, *FC&SF* December 1995). We guess that while things don't look too good for the western troops defending the border, it may well yet come out all right in the end because this is the way of such things. In any event we have to remember that the Merduks are not the Ottoman Turks and we must not equate their fortunes. We wonder whether Hawkwood will find his mythical Western continent and think that, on balance, he probably will. However, although Hawkwood may remind us of Christopher Columbus, things could well turn out different for him. The book makes no pretence to being a standalone novel: this is obviously one story spread across several books, rather than a series of linked, self-contained works, and it can hardly fail to leave the reader wanting more.

The publishers proudly trumpet this as 'a major new fantasy'. In marketing terms this may well be true: it certainly seems to have the same sort of appeal as the works of the other market leaders in the genre and it seems entirely possible that this series could give Kearney the same sort of commercial success as, say, David Eddings. It's not an ambitious work, it doesn't push back the boundaries of the genre, but it's an enjoyable enough fantasy adventure.

**John Kessel,
Mark L. Van Name &
Richard Butner (Eds)**

Intersections
Tor, 1996, 384pp, \$23.95

Reviewed by John Newstring

This is one of the most impressive short story collections I have ever read. It consists of the revised versions of stories presented at the seventh Sycamore Hill Writers Conference that took place in the summer of 1994 and provides as good a vindication of such events as one is likely to get. At least four of the stories are absolute crackers and only one, 'Missing Connections' by Mark Van Name falls seriously short. An indication of the quality of the collection is that Bruce Sterling's contribution, 'Bicycle Repairman', is one of the weaker stories.

The Sycamore Hill gathering is one of a number of regular workshops in the States that continue the tradition begun by Damon Knight in the 1950s. It was initiated by John Kessel in 1984 and since then has included among its participants the likes of Orson Scott Card, Connie Willis, Karen Joy Fowler, Harlan Ellison, James Morrow, Pat Murphy, Lewis Shiner, Richard Paul Russo and many more. The 1994 Conference was held at the North Carolina State University in North Hall, a former motel. The proceedings took place in:

an enormous dimly-lit room showing shabby signs of lost motel-quality elegance. Picture faux-Gothic room dividers, bench seats along low windows, many round tables, armchairs, and a large nonfunctioning vacant mirror-backed bar. Several North Carolina thunderstorms pouring through the leaky ceiling added to the gothic ambience.

All that was missing was Ken Russell with a film crew!

According to the editors, the workshop format provides an opportunity for writers 'to get together and reduce their alienation, talk across the divide of ideology.' The proceedings are not just limited to formal critiques but embrace late-night conversations, early-morning work-outs, basket-ball games, experimental cooking and parties. Evidently the participants had a good time.

The four stories that most impressed/affected me were Jonathan Lethem's 'The Hardened Criminals', Alexander Jablovsk's 'The Fury at Colonus', James Patrick Kelly's 'The First Law of Thermodynamics' and Karen Joy Fowler's 'The

Marianas Islands'. Others would have different preferences but for my money these four stories would justify the collection on their own.

Lethem's 'The Hardened Criminals' is a particularly grim oppressive story of a prison where the walls, thirty-two stories high and rising, are literally built of hardened criminals. Nick Marra, a young tearaway, finds himself in a cell where his father is part of the wall, irremovably fixed in place but still sentient and capable of seeing, hearing and speaking. The writing successfully renders the enormity of what has been done to these men mundane, an everyday atrocity. This is not an exotic future, but America today. At one point, Nick is taken up to the roof:

The roof was a worksite; they were always adding another level, stacking newly hardened bricks to form another floor. The workers were the first-timers, the still-soft. But there was nobody here now, just the disarray of discontinued work. A heap of thin steel dowels, waiting to run through the stilled bodies, plastic barrels of solvent for fusing their side surfaces together into a wall. In the middle of the roof was a pallet of new human bricks, maybe twenty-five or thirty of them, under a battened-down tarp. In the roar of the wind I could still just make out the sound of their keening.

This is a chilling story that in places is genuinely upsetting. The trouble is, I suspect it would be Michael Howard's favourite as well. In their Introduction, the editors report that Bruce Sterling took exception to this story, regarding it as a violation of taste. In a world of real concentration camps how can we justify imaginary ones? he asked. On the contrary, Lethem's is a tremendously powerful metaphorical critique of US penal policy. His imagery heightens our perception of reality, increases our awareness of what is wrong with our world. This is the opposite of the bathos Sterling condemns.

The Fowler, Jablovsk and Kelly stories are just as impressive and stimulating though in very different ways. The other ten stories are, with the exception of Van Name's lightweight contribution, all good solid efforts that are well worth a look.

What of Sterling's 'Bicycle Repairman'? This is a complacent effort, routinely pushing all the right buttons but without passion or conviction. Sterling is freewheeling here, I'm afraid, the sooner he comes out of the other side of postmodernism the better.

**Mercedes Lackey
& Larry Dixon**

The Silver Gryphon
Orion, 1996, 322pp, £16.99

Review by Lynne Bispham

In *The Silver Gryphon*, third in the *Mage Wars* series, Tadrith the gryphon is one of the magical creatures created by the Mage Urtho. His father is Skandranon, the legendary Black Gryphon, hero of the *Mage Wars*, and while he is proud to be a member of the Silver Gryphons, the elite military and police force, Tadrith resents his father's fame. He is always known as the son of the Black Gryphon and is irritated by the fact that there is always someone reporting his every move to his father. He longs for a chance to discover his own strengths.

Tadrith's partner in the Silvers is the human Silverblade; also the offspring of folk renowned for their activities in the *Mage Wars*, Silverblade is frustrated by what she sees as her parents' over-protectiveness and interference. When the pair are assigned to an isolated border post where they will be alone and totally reliant on their own resources, they are delighted: here is a chance to prove themselves.

Of course, from the parents' point of view, their fears for their children are fully justified. Amberdrake sees Silverblade as extremely vulnerable, while Skandranon finds it hard to come to terms with the fact that he is growing older and his sons are eager to make their own way in the world.

Tadrith flies to the outpost harnessed to a basket containing Silverblade and their provisions, a spell making the basket weightless; but as they cross a remote rainforest the magic suddenly fails and the pair plunge to the ground. Though badly hurt, they are able to make a shelter and hunt, but they discover that all their magical equipment has been 'drained' - by whom or for what purpose, they can only speculate. Their best chance of rescue lies in reaching a river where they can be more easily discovered, but as they make their way through the dense jungle they become aware that they are being followed by the creature or creatures responsible for the loss of their magic. Meanwhile, back in the city of White Gryphon, the respective sets of parents are frantic with worry and are using all their political influence to organise a rescue.

The Silver Gryphon, with its likeable characters and the tension of Tadrith and Silverblade's trek through the jungle, is

a good light read. It is self-contained, though it is probably best read as one episode in an on-going series. It is rather an oddity among fantasy novels in that it concentrates on the relationships between a few characters and one particular incident, rather than the usual action-packed scenario with a

cast of thousands. So, if you are looking for a respite from the battle between the forces of good and evil, but still need your input of fantasy, this book could be worth looking at.

The preceding 'Mage Wars' book, *The White Gryphon*, is reviewed on page 29

Tanith Lee

When the Lights Go Out

Headline Feature, 1996, 246pp, £16.99

Reviewed by Helen McNabb

The book begins with a message in a bottle – a message from the Titanic – and ends with another message from the sea. Although the opening sets the scene for something strange, though it is unclear what form this strangeness will take, the first full chapter is very mundane.

Hesta Webb is in school, having a confrontation with a supply teacher who believes her red hair is dyed, which results in Hesta being sent from the room, leaving school early and waiting at the bus stop for her friend Janey. Hesta is an ordinary enough 16-year-old from an unhappy home, she dislikes her mother and her father is away working on an oil rig, the house is not a home and she feels more at home with Janey's mother, Lulu.

Hesta returns home to find her mother and her mother's lover have used her bed for a sexual romp so, pausing only to plant a mousetrap in her mother's underwear drawer, she sets off for a daytrip to the seaside with Janey. At the end of the day she stays behind when Janey goes home. In a mainstream novel at this point drug abuse, prostitution, theft and all sorts of other degradations would doubtless befall our heroine; but in this book Skilt invites her to come and stay in a disused hotel with a disparate group of what might be called social misfits.

It is difficult to write much more about what happens without giving away the story, which is one of the book's main strengths. Odd things happen: Hesta witnesses two murders – one of a baby one of a photographer, one real one ghostly – and in this 'out of season' town, with the funfair closed and the bunting down, the townsfolk don't charge Hesta and her friends for items in the shops or pub.

Through all this, Hesta remains detached, largely uninvolved even though people tell her about their pasts, their problems, their dreams. A detective is sent to find her and ends up staying in the pub; her mother and the lover come to look for her and both find other lovers and strange fates in the main

hotel; her father disappears off the oil rig. At one point, Hesta leaves the squat and goes to stay with Hassinger, the man who found the message from the Titanic, where she finds her favourite brands of soap as though someone knew she was coming. She has reached the place she was destined to find. She shows signs of rejecting it, questions parts of it, but her protests are never convincing. Plenty of things happen in the book, many of the characters are fundamentally altered by the end, changed completely in their outlook and behaviour; unfortunately, the personality which is least satisfactory is the one that is most important, Hesta herself.

We do not see the story through her eyes but she is the protagonist, and an oddly passive one. The actions she does take – laying the mousetrap and leaving home at the beginning of the book – do not develop once she is alone. The love of her father, which is important to her at the beginning, vanishes so she can look on his dead body without a qualm. It is as though she is on the tide and floats where it takes her. The reader is never in doubt that she will fulfil the destiny which is mapped out for her, she has no real choice. This makes for a boring character; Hesta, unfortunately, is dull. She does not grow or develop, she has no need to, like a figurehead she fits into the niche into which she is put. This, more unfortunately, makes the book dull too.

The things that work extremely well are the accumulating strangenesses, the slowly widening view of a town which is not what it seems, what happens out of season and how that affects the minor characters. Bit by bit the picture is built up until the reader understands things which had been puzzling. It is done very skilfully, but because of Hesta's puppet-like nature the picture lacks depth. Some of the writing is evocative, graphic, even poetic but other parts try too hard to achieve a striking result and the consequent failures in grammar could put some people off altogether. Tanith Lee's fans will doubtless enjoy it, and taken on a superficial level it is an extremely enjoyable book: it held my interest and I wanted to know the outcome, was intrigued by some of the rituals and the concept of the town. I just wish that the central character had had more personality.

L.E. Modesitt Jr

The Death of Chaos

Orbit, 1996, 551pp, £16.99

Reviewed by Andrew Adams

This is the fifth and last book in a series whose previous volumes were: *The Magic of Recluse*, *The Towers of Sunset*, *The Magic Engineer* and *The Order War*.

Modesitt makes efforts to make this book as stand-alone as possible, with constant descriptions of what has gone before while the main character, Lerris, muses on the implications. The first chapter is full of this: three lines of 'current time' events interspersed with paragraphs of reflection on past events. This doesn't really work, and I suspect it is always tedious if you have read the other books, particularly if you have read them recently. Why more authors don't do a separate 'What has gone before' section, as Julian May does in the *Saga of the Exiles*, is beyond me. These reflections do quite well at explaining the emotions and reasoning of Lerris, but

they don't explain what's really going on in the world, even as he understands it.

Beyond that quibble, the style of the book is rather irritating. The viewpoint changes from the standard third person past-tense omnipotent narrator for some events to first person past tense for Lerris's story to third person present tense for events surrounding a particular powerful group – and this tends to distract rather than enhance one's enjoyment. The switch to present tense in particular is different enough to jar one out of involvement in the book, and reduce the suspension of disbelief.

Modesitt has some excellent ideas behind this narrative jumble, both in terms of story and character. Lerris – torn between desire to be a powerful Mage, an excellent craftsman, a good consort to his partner and many other things besides, as all real people are – is a complex character, and many of the other main characters are well-drawn. The story mixes magic and science quite well, explaining the magical basis for science and something of a scientific basis for the magic. He doesn't pull any punches at the end, either. This is not your average

identi-kit fantasy quest where the hero wins out and everyone lives happily ever after. The end is logical and believable given the build-up: not gods appearing out of the machine to save the day, but heroes succeeding through effort and sacrifice. A touch too much emphasis is placed on Lerris's day-to-day trials and tribulations for my taste, though that is a matter of taste; in general the way his day-to-day life is interspersed among the great deeds done under external and internal pressures makes a

refreshing change from heroes and derring-do with little attention to money, relationships, social issues and the like.

On balance: good ideas, moderately poor execution. If you're interested, read the series as a whole, though, and don't start part-way through. Despite being (I think) a series of five separate stories, each after the first depends on too much history to be truly stand-alone.

Nichelle Nichols *Beyond Uhura* Bantam, 1995, 320pp, £9.99

Reviewed by Barbara Davies

With autobiographies and memoirs already published by Leonard (Spock) Nimoy, William (Kirk) Shatner and George (Sulu) Takei, it's no surprise to see Nichelle (Uhura) Nichols joining the lucrative bandwagon that is *Star Trek* publishing.

I was never particularly impressed by the USS Enterprise's token Black woman with her impractical miniskirts and long fingernails. She seemed to do little more than say: 'Hailing frequencies open, Captain!' and stick a metal gadget in her ear. So *Beyond Uhura* is something of a revelation, for there is more to Nichelle (christened Grace) Nichols than her screen role would suggest.

Born in Illinois in the early 1930s, Nichols lived through racist and sexist times. Entries in the comprehensive index are a good indication:

- Nichols, Nichelle
 - Canada assault
 - MGM incident
 - at mobster's club
 - racism and ...

In Utah in 1956, Mormon hotels refused her reservation when they saw she was Black, and while touring in Canada she was nearly raped by a respected member of the community who mistook her for a helpless 'little colored shawgirl' - she courageously and successfully prosecuted him for assault. Then there was the bigwig at MGM who insisted that sleeping with him was an unwritten clause in her contract - she refused.

Nichols is flattering about her own talents, quoting Josephine Baker: 'My darling! Ooh la la, you're such a beauty' and Duke Ellington: 'You are an excellent dancer, Miss Nichols.' But it would seem with some justification: the photographs show a stunningly attractive dancer and singer who toured extensively in the US and Europe in the 1950s and '60s, and her credits include *Porgy and Bess*.

Though trained in both ballet and Afro-Cuban dance, and claiming a singing range of three-and-a-half octaves, Nichols let these talents languish unused when in 1963 she turned to television acting. Her first role was in the TV series *The Lieutenant*, produced by Gene Roddenberry (who she often cringingly calls 'the Great Bird of the Galaxy'). It was the start of a friendship which lasted until Roddenberry's death; at one point they were lovers, then Roddenberry revealed that he was simultaneously having an affair with Majel (later to become his wife). Nichols ended the relationship, something Roddenberry could never quite accept.

Star Trek made Nichols famous, but it typecast her irreversibly. It was also something of a disappointment. The substantial role of Uhura that she and Roddenberry had jointly envisaged was whittled away first by the studio 'suits' who couldn't stomach the idea of a Black female being prominent on a TV show, and then by such as William Shatner who wanted all the limelight for himself. Even so, Uhura's continuing presence in the series was encouraged by Martin Luther King and inspired Whoopi Goldberg among others.

Nichols doesn't milk the rift between Shatner and the rest of the *Star Trek* 'family' to death (she is likewise reticent about her affair with Roddenberry), but she is sorrowful that Shatner, initially her 'hero', 'warm, open, fun', became someone who considered himself 'the Big Picture and the rest of us... no more important than props'.

I'm unclear how much of *Beyond Uhura* is actually penned by Nichols herself, as she acknowledges the help of a Patty Romanowski 'who unfailingly aided me in bringing this book to fruition with her caring, her understanding, her unerring guidance, her sisterhood, and her extraordinary talent.' The gushing 'lummy' style of that dedication is, alas, typical - one 1951 photograph of Nichols and her then husband is captioned: 'I was ecstatically (sic) pregnant with my son Kyle!' But with the first half of the book devoted to her life before *Star Trek* while the second details its huge impact on her, there is something for Trekkers and non-Trekkers alike.

After the original *Star Trek* ended, Nichols became heavily involved with NASA, encouraging minorities to enrol as astronauts with some success. She also resumed her dancing and singing career. Her next project, according to the epilogue, is a novel, *Saturn's Child*, to be written with Margaret Bonano. Nichelle Nichols may be in her sixties, but she's certainly not thinking of retiring yet!

Star Trek Creator: The Authorised Biography of Gene Roddenberry is reviewed on page 25

Joe Nigg**Wonder Beasts***Libraries Unlimited, 1995, 160pp, £24.95*

Reviewed by K.V. Bailey

Although this is a popular presentation with an A4 coffee table appearance and printed in red type, Nigg's research is thorough, the extent of his knowledge is impressive, and the text and illustrations in this book will be of serious interest to all those attracted to mythology and the fantastic.

It is essentially an edited anthology with connecting comments and substantial introductory essays to its four main subjects: the Phoenix, the Griffin, the Unicorn and the Dragon. All of these 'Wonder Beasts' have wide provenances, each (the Griffin excepted) is one of the four great emblematic zoomorphs of China. Dr Nigg describes his book as something of a literary/scientific/historical hybrid, as is appropriate to his subjects which, in their various imagined forms, have been created from travellers' memories, distortions and exaggerations. The legendary Prester John and the historical Marco Polo were among the sources and transmitters of such images. At the time of the Enlightenment interest waned but now, from elusive Big Foot to actual coelacanth and revived dinosaurs, they are with us again.

The book's documentation of the four chief subjects is eclectic – that of the Phoenix, for example, ranging from Herodotus to E. Nesbit, and that of the Griffin from Pliny to Lewis Carroll. But the major symbolic and cosmic significances of the Beasts are never lost sight of and are complemented by reproductions from various bestiaries, and also by such delights as Tenniel's sleeping Griffin and Edward Lane's Rukh.

Of all the Beasts, the Unicorn approximates most closely to a 'real' mammal. The two branches of its legend are

differentiated: the maiden and unicorn of medieval tapestries, and the lion and unicorn rivalries of heraldry and indeed of the chase observed by Alice 'all round the town'. The grafting of a single horn bud onto sheep has been realised in American laboratories but may have been an age-old African practice, perhaps giving the legend its foundation. The Dragon in all its forms, serpentine and saurian, is a world myth. Here it is detailed from Beowulf to the Lambton Worm. Science fiction should in respect of that latter phenomenon perhaps have been represented through Ian Watson, but it does find its way in through a long excerpt from the Cosmic Carnival of Stanislaw Lem. This elaborate and satirical fable concerns King Poleander of Cyberia who created a super computer to extend his cybernetic empire and then, in danger of being overwhelmed by it, created a super computer on the moon to control it. This it did by inventing an electrosaur which in turn became power-hungry and tyrannical. The King eventually defeats the cybernetic dragon he has caused to be created by a sequence of paradoxical word and math games, and emerges a wiser and less militaristic monarch.

A final chapter details beasts other than the author's privileged four: the Basilisk, the Catoblepas and the Bishop fish – this last a notorious manufacture popular with fakers and showmen.

Nigg's reference list is comprehensive and gives due credit to Edward Tiptell's *The Historie of Four-footed Beasts* (1658) and mentions what is my own favourite of works in this genre, T.H. White's *The Book of Beasts* (1954) which draws chiefly on the medieval bestiaries. An adequate index helps to make Joe Nigg's book a desirable work of reference as well as being a pleasant read.

Eric S. Nylund**Pawn's Dream***Hodder & Stoughton, 1996, 345pp, £16.99*

Reviewed by Vikki Lee

Roland Pritchard ekes out a meagre living as a gas station attendant, and spends the rest of his time looking after his schizophrenic mother. The only variety in his life comes from the regular, usually traumatic, events caused by his mother's illness. And then there are his dreams. Roland's dreams are his escape from the hum-drum of everyday life: in his dreams, he is a simple postulant in a monastery, and his life is dedicated to study and the mastery of ancient, no longer used languages.

But all this changes suddenly and drastically when Roland receives a letter with a \$100 dollar bill in it. The letter is from a man named Eugene Rhodes who claims to be seeking descendants of Clay Pritchard, Roland's father, and an inheritance is mentioned. Unable to discuss Clay with his mother, a sure way of sending her into fits, Roland decides to use the money to find out more.

In his dreams, Roland the acolyte has served the Abbey of Glossimere for some twenty years, since being left there as a foundling. Until now he has been content with the only life he has ever known, but Roland begins to get itchy feet and finally succumbs to a desire to explore the wider world he has only read about in books. To do this, however, Roland must escape the attentions of WaterStone, a White Robe of the Abbey's council of elders. Roland can leave by choice before he takes his vows, and before the castration which goes with the taking

of those vows, but no one has successfully done so in living memory. The arrival of Smoking Bear and Aesop, two outsiders who have come to the Abbey to barter for knowledge, facilitates Roland's escape and plunges him into a feudal world of horror, magic and bloodshed.

In the waking world, Roland is also plunged into a dangerous world of intrigue and murder: the legacy of his father Clay. In his dreams, things are no better. Slowly but surely the boundaries between fantasy and reality are eroded, and Roland begins to understand the meaning and nature of 'the families'.

In *Pawn's Dream*, Nylund offers us a fast-paced and readable first novel. Although the theme of parallel worlds is by no means new, Nylund does manage to inject a breath of fresh air into his tale. The magical dreamworld is dying, and those members of 'the families' that remain in our world are the only ones who can save it. Roland is, of course, the catalyst for this salvation. Suspense is maintained by Roland's lack of knowledge of his father Clay, and his relationship with the other 'special' families is a constant source of revelation. The climax is not at all predictable, and gives the impression that this may be setting the scene for a continuing series set in the same world(s).

I enjoyed this novel, but would further books in the series sustain the interest? The ending certainly implies that further volumes might be afoot, but I wonder whether Nylund's world would continue to hold my interest.

Tim Powers *Expiration Date* Tor, 1996, 381pp, \$23.95

Reviewed by Joseph Nicholas

Serendipity works. I came across the following passage in the January 1996 *History Today* after I'd finished Tim Powers's *Expiration Date*, but it perfectly summarises his theme and source of inspiration:

In the late 1920s, [Henry] Ford collaborated on an inspirational self-help book entitled *The Power that Wins* in which he propounded the idea of a central guiding consciousness whose messages individuals received when they were 'in the right mental state to receive them'. He explained further that 'as with a properly tuned antenna, thoughts seem to come to those ready to receive them'. [Thomas] Edison had been receptive to destiny's waveband. Ford's image of the process of communication was actually more one of spiritual dispatch riders than of radio broadcasts. He described humans as 'central stations with myriads of entities coming and going all the time with messages'. Once accepted, such entities clustered around the soul and were carried from one incarnation to the next. Given Ford's conviction that Edison was one of the universal brain's preferred receivers, it is hardly surprising that he gathered up the relics of the Wizard's past for future generations. Indeed, he allegedly pursued his logic to the end; the capstone of his collection was supposedly a small vial labelled 'Edison's last breath!'

Peter Ling, on 'Henry Ford's Greenfield Village'

Powers's twist is that the vial containing Edison's last breath was stolen shortly thereafter, and by 1992 was kept inside a plaster bust of Dante on the mantelpiece of a pair of Hindu spiritualists who are bringing up their son, Koot Hoomie Parganas, as a successor to Krishnamurti. Wanting to enjoy the same things as his peers, the boy runs away from home, smashing the bust and taking the vial. Unstopping it, he releases Edison's ghost – which, in addition to taking up residence within and sometimes taking over his body, awakens the interest of ghost-hunters throughout LA. Normally, these hunters eat the weaker ghosts thrown off by less forceful personalities; the challenge, however, is to eat the strongest, thus becoming stronger still.

Also involved – initially pursuing other ends but (plot logic tells you) eventually being drawn into the same hunt – are Peter Sullivan, a former Hollywood lighting technician who once worked for a producer/director who chose her locations so she could draw out the ghosts they contained; Angelica Elizalde, a former psychiatrist trying to make belated amends to those who died at one of her seances two years previously; Loretta deLavara, Sullivan's former employer, who is tracking down the surviving members of a fifties TV sitcom for a special reunion edition; the ghost of Sullivan's father; a ghost-hunter with only one arm (it took me half the novel to twig the obviousness of the reference to another TV series); a man who has been physically dead for seventeen years but whose ghost has been strong enough to keep his body alive; the psychic mask of escapist and spiritualism debunker Harry Houdini; and the offstage presence of Henry Ford, whose bizarre spiritualist ideas have given rise to it all.

It sounds an over-complicated mess, and it's to Powers's great credit that he not only manages to fit each element neatly together but, within the context of the novel, invests them with a certain plausibility. Nothing jars: every new development builds smoothly on the previous; there is never a moment when one feels that the author has resorted to a *deus ex machina* to make the frankly unlikely plot work, or introduced some artefact or plot-strand that sits oddly with the others. And that, unfortunately, is also what is wrong with the novel – because it flows so smoothly and because everything seems so natural, the story never develops any sense of menace. Even at the climax, with the ghost hunters in final confrontation with the live and the ghost-possessed humans, when we know that not everyone will survive, there is nothing threatening or unsettling. Yet a novel built around Henry Ford's notion of 'spiritual dispatch riders', where the replacement of a person's consciousness with hither-thither ghost fragments would render their personalities subject to continuous random change, should at the very least be unsettling.

There are other problems. Firstly, the choice of a boy as one of the protagonists means that the author's subconscious moral censor works to ensure that nothing particularly horrible does happen, either to him or (because it would have to be reflected in their experiences) the other good guys. Secondly, the overlit LA setting, and in particular the sharp delineation between light and shadow characteristic of such latitudes (not to mention that the winters there are warm enough for shorts), tends to negate the story's suggestion of something dark hovering at the margins of the visible world, in particular the resonances we're supposed to derive from Hallowe'en, the expiration date of the title. And thirdly, while the knowing references to Hollywood culture cleverly parallel the bright shallowness of filmic legend and the insubstantiality of the weaker ghosts eventually eaten by the stronger, they are sometimes too overdrawn and thus sometimes too intrusive.

So it's a clever failure – but it's an interesting failure, and could even be interpreted from another perspective as a flawed success: as another in a continuing series of novels from an author constantly pushing at the envelope, taking risks, seeing what will work, learning from the mistakes, and writing something different next time. Powers has, of course, been doing this for most of his career, and it's refreshing to see that he shows no signs of wanting to stop and settle (like too many other writers) for repeating a successful formula – although it could perhaps be argued that genre-mixing of Powers's kind is itself repetition of a formula. But he does it so well...

And leaves one, in this case, with several interesting questions. It's extraordinary that Henry Ford, the architect of the modern mass-production systems which have helped shape the twentieth century, could have believed in something as anti-rational as a communications system based on the coming and going of spirits, but I'll bet Powers has a copy of his book. I wonder if it's signed?

Terry Pratchett

Johnny and the Bomb

Doubleday, 1996, 206pp, £12.99

♣ Corgi Audiobook, read by Tony Robinson

Reviewed by John Wallace

Johnny Maxwell, as anyone knows who has met him before in *Only You Can Save Mankind* and *Johnny and the Dead*, is a warrior. This time round he's worried about Paradise Street. Which is a bit weird, even for Johnny, because Paradise Street doesn't exist anymore. It was destroyed in 1941 along with the pickle factory in the Blackbury Blitz.

Johnny gets his chance to see the Blitz closer than he expects to when he helps Mrs Tachyon, Blackbury's bag lady, after she collapses in an alley. Unknown to Johnny, she collapsed because she's just come from 1941 where she has been blown up by an unexploded bomb which suddenly changed its status...

Terry Pratchett has a keen eye for people, although most of the ones that he writes about are the - not losers - the ordinary people who are not really winners. In Johnny Maxwell and his mates, he has created the sort of kids that we were (well, I was anyway). Instant empathy. He takes these characters and invents situations for them that require their own special talents to deal with... or at least to cope with.

Only You Can Save Mankind was set against the background of the Gulf War, the computerised TV war not that different from the computer game of the title. In *Johnny and the Dead*, Johnny's preoccupation with the awful things that the planners were going to do to the cemetery provide the impetus for the events in the book. But in *Johnny and the Bomb* the trigger is less clear. Maybe Pratchett just did it for fun?

Even so, this book is almost as serious as its predecessors. The humour comes from the interaction between Johnny and his friends, Big Mac, Wobblers, Yo-less and Kirsty/Kassandra; the seriousness from the real people caught up in their problems. This is a book for young people, but that doesn't harm its complexity any, there are enough twists and turns here to keep anyone guessing till the end. And Pratchett forgets nothing! The niggly little paradox-like things that worried me about time travel and the weird things that might happen if you left anything anachronistic in the past have been covered by the end.

So, even though this book is not quite as serious as the other two, it is a satisfying read, especially if you are someone who likes all of the loose ends to be neatly tied up.

Johnny and the Bomb is also available on two audio cassettes, read by Tony Robinson, totalling two and a half hours running time. The audio version is not too different from its written counterpart, some of the jokes have been left out to shorten the text and to keep the action moving in a medium which promotes a less focused concentration span, but all of the plot's complexities are there, and that is the important thing. And to someone like me, with fond memories of such gems as 'Tales from Fat Tulip's Garden' and his own adaptation of the *Odyssey*, Tony Robinson's delivery being dry and matter of fact, but when he gets into the swing of things he does his inimitable best to bring Johnny and the rest to life. If you are one of those people who lives life at such a pace that you can only catch up with your books in the car tape player (or over your ironing), then this should be in your collection.

Melanie Rawn

The Ruins of Ambrai

Macmillan, 1996, 678pp, £16.99

Reviewed by Lynne Bispham

The planet Lenfell was colonised from Earth long ago, but its inhabitants have forgotten their origins and such science fictional trappings can safely be ignored by the readers of *The Ruins of Ambrai* which is, to all intents and purposes, a fantasy novel, well-written and highly readable.

The Waste War was fought between the Mage Guardians, and organisation of Mageborns forbidden to interfere in government, and the Lords of Malerri, a breakaway group of Mage Guardians who seek political power. The war left Lenfell devastated by magical pollution which has caused widespread birth defects, leading to the categorisation of families (or Names) into Bloods and Tiers according to the number of defects in each generation.

The hierarchical society described in this book is, however, subtly different from the mock-feudal society found in so many fantasy novels, being far more complex and credible. The author has obviously spent time not only planning the economic infrastructure of her imagined world, but has also given thought to what could realistically happen if this society were disrupted by a struggle for power between competing factions within it. A further difference between Lenfell and the typical fantasy world is that its society is dominated by women. The absurdity of considering one gender superior to another is made very clear when the unjust laws and rules of behaviour that were considered appropriate in our own society not so long ago are, here, applied to men. Men owe obedience to their mothers until they marry, when they are expected to obey their wives. Men cannot inherit - property goes to a First Daughter.

Women talk of men in terms of their looks and dowries...

The main thrust of *The Ruins of Ambrai's* dense plot concerns the fate of the three mageborn daughters of the Ambrai Name, Glenin, Sarra and Caillet. Their father, Auvry Feiran, formerly a Mage Guardian, has joined the Malerri. He leaves their mother, Maichen Ambrai, taking with him the eldest daughter, Glenin, and allies himself to First Councillor Avira Anniyas and her schemes for political power. It is Auvry Feiran who torches the capital city of Ambrai, including the Academy where the Mage Guardians were trained. With the help of the Warrior Mage, Gorynel Desse, Maichen and Sarra flee for their lives. Maichen dies giving birth to Caillet and the two girls are given to foster families, their identities hidden and their magic Warded against discovery.

Sarra grows up determined to play a part in the Rising, an underground movement that is trying to prevent the Malerri gaining control of the government. Through various twists and turns of the plot, she discovers that she and Caillet are sisters, and that Caillet's magic is so powerful that she must assume the leadership of the Mage Guardians. Glenin, meanwhile, has been raised as one of the Malerri, marrying Garron, Avira Anniyas's son. Whilst working towards a Malerri victory, Glenin also has her own magical and political agenda. A host of minor characters have roles to play in the Ambrai sisters' story, and it is to the author's credit that they are as well drawn as the major characters, not just devices to advance the plot.

Here, then, is an enjoyable and inventive fantasy, a real page-turner, with believable characters whom the reader is sorry to leave at the close of the novel. *The Ruins of Ambrai* has swords, magic, desperate flights, romance, pathos, humour and even a touch of feminist social comment - what more could any reasonable fantasy reader ask for?

George Saunders *CivilWarLand in Bad Decline* Cape, 1996, 183pp, £9.99

Reviewed by Paul Kincaid

Dirty Realism, a term coined by the British magazine *Granta*, applies primarily to a style of contemporary American fiction best represented by the work of Raymond Carver, Richard Ford and – when his imagination doesn't fly too fast and loose – T. Coraghessan Boyle. It is marked by a short, sharp, demotic prose style adapted from Hemingway, and a concentration on the minutiae of daily life; its characters tend to be losers and drifters, and its typical narrative shape is a dying fall. At its best it can be sudden, surprising and invigorating; at its worst, an unrelieved wail of despair without even the benefit of plot to carry the reader along. The name was conjured up as a conscious opposition to Magic Realism, the stories may be footloose and violent but they eschew anything of the fantastic. Nevertheless, it is a narrative style that should suit near-future science fiction perfectly – how perfectly, George Saunders demonstrates in this stunning debut.

This is the America of shopping malls and theme parks, a thin glamour painted over a deep and rotting malaise. And in George Saunders' eyes the paint is flaking.

Thus, in the title story, a theme park devoted to the American Civil War – one of those peculiarly American institutions where actors take on rôles within the park and spend their days schizophrenically talking to modern visitors in their historic persona – is plagued by financial problems and vandals. One of the people hired to play a soldier proves more than willing to stalk and kill any vandals who venture into the park, which briefly restores their fortunes until he gets out of hand and more and more innocent people start turning up dead. Meanwhile the ghost of a genuine Civil War veteran and his family provide a curious and ironic reflection on the downfall of modern America.

Theme parks recur in 'The Wavemaker Falters', a tale of love and loss among the entertainers at a swimming pool; 'Downtrodden Mary's Failed Campaign of Terror', in which sabotaging the glass-bellied cows fails to be a sufficient act of revenge to redeem the downtrodden in this curious zoo; and 'Bounty', the best and longest story in the collection. This is an America of genetic defects, where the pure are legislating away all the civil rights of those born with a tail or a hump or mottled skin or claws. In the west they are bought and sold as slaves, but in the east they have some protection, some security, performing in theme parks. Cole is Flawed, but getting by okay in a medieval theme park if you don't count the restrictions, the appalling diet and the constant petty humiliations. Then his sister, also Flawed, marries a pure rancher from out west. Convinced she is being tricked into slavery, Cole escapes the theme park and sets out to rescue her. His odyssey through the by-ways of American intolerance is a journey deep into the heart of psychological darkness, and a gripping, distasteful journey it is too. Of course Connie, his sister, turns out to be alright, redeemed by love, but Cole is changed by his experiences and there is no easy, settled ending.

Nevertheless, there is a way out of this mire of decline and decay. Love and a curiously humane ability to make sacrifices can still achieve a certain redemption. The proprietor of a failing personal interactive holography outfit learns that, at the cost of all his memories, in 'Offloading for Mrs Schwartz'. So does the narrator of 'Isabelle' who ends up devoting his life to caring for an invalid known as 'Boneless'.

It's not perfect. Sometimes it's damn hard. But I look after her and she squeals with delight when I come home, and the sum total of sadness in the world is less than it would have been.

Saunders' future is one of violence, cruelty and failure. But somehow, out of it all, the sum total of human sadness is reduced. That's not a bad achievement.

Charles Sheffield &**Jerry Pournelle**

Reviewed by Barbara Davies

Higher Education

TOR, 1996, 286pp, \$21.95

Sixteen-year-old Rick Luban gets by at school by doing as little work as possible, having sex and larking about. So do his friends. One day a practical joke goes wrong and he is expelled. The future looks bleak – Rick can barely read and has no special skills – but, following the advice of a teacher, he seeks a job with Vanguard Mining and is taken on as a trainee. The training programme is long and hard and his fellow trainees – Vido Valdez, a thug who wants to beat Rick at everything, and Deedee Mao, 'big, loud, and self-confident, just the sort of aggressive female that he hated...' – don't help matters. But Rick copes and soon he and the others are heading out into deep space, next stop the asteroid belt.

The blurb calls *Higher Education*:

the beginning of a new and ambitious science fiction project: the *Jupiter* novels. The idea here is to produce an ongoing series of books comparable to the classic 'Heinlein juveniles' of the past. By this we mean novels

that are upbeat, optimistic, and scientifically accurate, and that will appeal to both adults and teenagers.

Sheffield and Pournelle haven't quite managed to fill this tall order. It's hard to pinpoint the problem. Upbeat and optimistic? Well, we're shown that with intelligence and hard work you can make something of yourself. Scientifically accurate? Definitely, though there's a tendency to info-dump that I found off-putting. Will appeal to both adults and teenagers? There's plenty of action to keep the pages turning and enough strong and sympathetic characters of both sexes (an advance on the old 'juveniles') to keep the reader involved. On the down side, I often felt lectured on the authors' pet topics: the litigiousness of Americans, the shortsightedness of lack of competition in schools (because no losers means no loss of self-esteem), the benefits of literacy (though surely they're preaching to the converted?). They lack the lightness of touch Heinlein showed in such as *The Star Beast*.

The blurb expands:

The *Jupiter* novels will give readers of the nineties the same thrilling, inspirational reading that Heinlein and Asimov provided for previous generations.

(Asimov too? The tall order gets even taller!)

Thrilling, inspirational reading? This may be the problem. *Higher Education* portrays a realistic future that is strangely uninspiring. The title betrays the book's educational aspirations; I know some teachers who insist on forcing reality down the throats of children already choking on too much of it. Yet fantasies can inspire and inform our lives, obliquely

maybe but more importantly enjoyably. That exuberance and 'sense of wonder', which Heinlein and Asimov offered their young readers by the planetful, is surely why they were so popular, and is missing here. I hope future volumes in this series supply this vital ingredient.

End of term report: satisfactory – could do better.

Dan Simmons

Endymion

Headline, 1996, 441pp, £16.99

Reviewed by Chris Amies

This novel continues the *Hyperion Cantos*, a two-volume work which recapitulated much of the imagery of the traditional space opera in a story of far-future pilgrims in a galaxy beset by religion and the weird cult of the Shrike, who can grant immortality or else an eternity of pain. Two stories are interlarded here, brought together by the search for what is essentially a Messiah: Aenea, who is about to be released by the Time Tombs and bring down the rule of organised religion. Ancient poet Martin Silenus (who, as his name suggests, was once military, scatological, and part-animal) chooses a young man called Raul Endymion to accompany Aenea into the future. Former soldier Endymion suspects he's being sent on a suicide mission; Silenus makes it clear that his view of heroism is somewhat different to that put forward by generals who throw 'disposable' lives into the field of conflict. Endymion is expected to push beyond the life which he had on his home planet – and which he was due to lose very shortly anyway – to become a hero in the ancient sense, a human taken up into the heavens.

Meanwhile the Pax, an arm of the very Jesuitical church which promises literal resurrection of the flesh due to a cruciform alien symbiote, is concerned that Aenea will bring about the end of its hegemony over known space. It sends Father-Captain De Soya to, it claims, merely bring her back. De Soya and his loyal crew undergo death and resurrection after death and resurrection in a fruitless search that becomes

less and less meaningful. What can Aenea threaten that is worse than what already exists? To Simmons' credit, De Soya is no villain, but a man limited by his beliefs, just as Endymion is limited by being a small-town lad who has never been very far. This is his strength as well as a liability. He is open to what Aenea needs to discover: the nature of the AI TechnoCore which built gateways through space-time and which the Church now fears may not be as dead as was thought; and the nature of what the TechnoCore discovered in the non-space: 'Lions and Tigers and Bears' as Aenea says.

That is not all the story though. At the outset Endymion is in an orbiting capsule waiting for his ordained death; and in his narration Endymion speaks of his life with the adult Aenea who, at the end of the novel, is no more than a child he deposits on the doorstep of a miraculously preserved Fallingwater. This is the house Frank Lloyd Wright built over a river at Bear Run, Pennsylvania; Lloyd Wright, with his belief in rationalism and the perfectibility of the built environment, and Teilhard de Chardin, for whom human knowledge might one day literally create God, stand as pointers to a forthcoming age of reason.

But while all this tremendous immanence is being hinted at, *Endymion* does bring in much of the scenery of space opera; the treeships, the water world whose hugest inhabitant is known as the 'Lantern-Mouth Leviathan' (shades of Roger Zelazny), the ice world inhabited by nomads and strange beasts, the cyborg warrior who is sent to destroy Endymion and Aenea when the Church has failed or refused. Epic it is, and hugely inventive, sustaining its power over four hundred pages with vast pace and energy.

Brian Stableford

Salamander's Fire

Legend, 1996, 518pp, £16.99

Reviewed by Barbara Davies

Middle volumes of *sf/fantasy* trilogies are always problematic. Book One paints the backdrop, introduces the characters and sets up the problem to be overcome or quest to be undertaken. Book Three brings resolution, recognition of lessons learned (and often a romantic wedding or two). But Book Two? The author must continue to juggle the balls tossed in the air in Book One; minor balls may fall and be replaced but major ones must remain airborne for use in Book Three. Often, then, Book Two is little more than travelogue, an interval between the acts.

Such an argument could be made against *Salamander's Fire: The Second Book of Genesys*. The quest for 'The Pool of Life' continues, the landscape changes, but little progress is actually made. But it is sometimes better to travel hopefully than to arrive and Stableford certainly makes the journey interesting!

The setting is *sf* masquerading as fantasy: a planet where all matter including stone and metal eventually rots. Colonised by humans and the flora and fauna they brought with them, there is now competition, friendly and otherwise, between their descendants and those of the planet's original inhabitants, Serpents, Salamanders, dragomites, manticores... Over the centuries, the tide of winners and losers has ebbed and flowed

and humans have had to undergo genetic engineering in order to survive. Quite what this involved has been lost in the mists of time, but there are rumours that 'Serpent's blood' flows in some human veins. This could have profound consequences, because periodically the planet undergoes a dramatic environmental shift which triggers something dormant in the genes...

Andris Myrasol, a minor prince, and his colleagues from the first book, Princess Lucrezia, the merchant Carus Fraxinus, the giantess Dhalla and the Serpent Mossassor among others, must travel to the eponymous 'Salamander's Fire'. This is easier said than done; the company's escorts, hive creatures known as dragomites, provoke a violent reaction from General Shabir, commander of the army patrolling the land they propose to cross. In Book One, Andris and his fellows underwent separate adventures before joining forces in the Dragomite Hills; Book Two, as you might expect, uses the bloody confrontation between the dragomites and General Shabir's men to split the company apart again. By the end of *Salamander's Fire*, some of Andris's company have reached their destination and some have not, but the answer to the riddle of their genetic heritage remains as elusive as ever.

I found it hard to get into this at first, even though I'd read and enjoyed the previous volume, *Serpent's Blood*. Stableford took the decision (wrongly, I think) to omit both a 'story so far' summary and a checklist of characters. Instead, his characters constantly refer to past events, dripfeeding the

missing information to the reader. Unfortunately, it isn't enough, and this lack undermines the opening action scene. Leaving a few unanswered questions to entice the reader is one thing, leaving so many that they are completely in the dark is another! Stableford's prose style doesn't exactly help; while smooth and erudite, it is also leisurely to say the least, full of long sentences, qualifiers and double negatives, and many of his

characters speak at great length too. All of which is a great shame, as the reward for persevering is a plot that gradually begins to grip, and an epic landscape peopled with vivid and wonderful alien creations that rival anything by Jack Vance.

Overall, I have mixed feelings about this volume, but I am intrigued enough to want to read the third and final part of the trilogy, *Chimera's Cradle*.

Diann Thornley

Echoes of Issel

TOR, 1996, 351pp, \$23.95

Reviewed by Stephen Payne

Tristan is the teenage son of Admiral Serege, Commander of the Unified Worlds Special Forces, but he has been used and abused by the alien masuki; brainwashed into believing his father is a murderer and a liar. The masuki are an unsavoury bunch of dog-faced creatures who like nothing better than a bit of rape and pillage; their idea of a good time is to conquer a planet and sell the populace into slavery – and those they can't sell, the old, the young and the infirm, they torture and kill. Anyway, because Tristan has been kept captive and knows his way around, he has to lead a bunch of commandos in to rescue the hostages from the masuki and save the day. Yes, it's about growing up. It's a coming-of-age novel where the young Tristan

discovers himself and comes to terms with his past and who he, and his father, really are.

Echoes of Issel is not really my cup of tea. It's not really sf. There's no sf idea, nothing sfal about it. It's simply a war story set in space where the masuki can be substituted for any off-the-shelf baddie you care to think of (or take against, perhaps). It's not badly written, not badly put together; it's competent enough as far as it goes. But I felt frustrated by it. I felt it was a cop-out. The masuki are just an excuse and they are never depicted as anything other than animals, despite their obvious technologies. The leading characters are drawn from a narrow cast and there is never any real attempt to understand the situation either politically or socially. While I was reading this novel I kept wondering what I would think if I lived in the society depicted in this book. I think it would be: what aren't they telling me? But maybe I'm just too suspicious.

Angus Wells

Exile's Children

Millenium, 1995, 582pp, £16.99, £10.99 pb

Reviewed by Andrew Adams

This hefty tome – weighing in at 582 pages – is really two novels with similar themes interwoven with each other. There is a plot connection but it's not really vital.

The shorter of the two is about three people exiled from the conquered country of Levan by an oppressive regime of invaders. One is a thief, justly exiled though he still has cause for complaint against the invaders, since if they find out about his powers of prophetic dreaming they will burn him at the stake. One reason he's a thief is to avoid their notice in honest employment. The other two are a serving girl, exiled for resisting rape at the hands of an officer of the invaders, and a gentleman exiled for murder – he killed a man who challenged him to a duel. They are exiled to the newly opened continent of Salvation. Following the normal sort of adventures they finally reach some measure of safety.

The other, longer, novel is about a group of 'barbarians', reminiscent of barbarian horse tribes from Conan to Robert Adams. They have five clans, two of which are at odds all the way through the book. Initially, a member of the 'good' tribe is exiled with his wife for killing someone who abducted and raped her. The killing was committed under a religiously

enforced truce, and only the crimes of the dead man mitigate the death sentence to exile. Later, everyone from this world becomes an exile or dies. There is some discontinuity within this part of the story: the 'evil' clan's magician (another prophetic dreamer) has some strange prophetic dreams offering 'Saruman's bargain' essentially. Despite appearing to take up this offer he and the clan chief do not seem to go through with the bargain.

The barbarian tribes and the neighbouring dwarfs are well-characterised, and the two worlds are well-described. There are odd niggles about the procession of the plot however, the main one being the discontinuity mentioned above. As with previous works by Wells, I find his writing to be a touch dry – the emotion is mostly lacking. In fact, the strongest emotions invoked by the book are anger at the injustices that result in the exile of the main characters.

The other main problem is Wells' choice of names. He has a particular fondness for y's in his names: one of the main characters is called Dayvd – forgivable. Later, we come across two minor characters who are only there to be killed off, Danyael and Rogyr. This is a touch overdone.

On the whole, this is a moderately good novel, with little scope for a direct sequel (a rarity these days), although he might re-use the world again. Not quite on a par with his earlier 'Kingdoms' trilogy, but an absorbing read generally.

Cherry Wilder

Signs of Life

TOR, 1996, 349pp, \$23.95

Reviewed by Norman Beswick

Cherry Wilder began her sf career with the *Torin* books for the juvenile market. Since her adult sf novel, *Second Nature*, was published in 1982 she has concentrated on fantasy and horror novels and a handful of sf short stories. *Second Nature* described the interactions of a number of human castaways on an Earth-like planet, Rhomary Land, which was also the home of other intriguing species. In *Foundation* 54, Yvonne Rousseau drew

comparisons between the events in that novel and the legendary experiences of castaways in colonial Australia and in Wilder's homeland, New Zealand.

This new novel returns to Rhomary Land, with survivors from the wrecked starship *Serendip* Dana making hazardous emergency landings in a number of lifeboats, quite unaware that any other humans have preceded them. They are scattered, so they do not know at first who has survived and who not. They are a various lot: military, scientists, musicians, androids, a few have psi talents and so on. Ambitions, group loyalties, prejudices, sexual liaisons and jealousies proliferate, almost pulling the community of survivors apart. Deaths from disease,

accident and homicide exacerbate the divisions; the pull of gravity on Rhomary is 1.75 of Earth's, increasing the physical strain; the unknown nature of the local flora and fauna add to the tensions. Then they begin to be aware of their by now indigenous human predecessors, to whom we as readers have been introduced quite early on.

Wilder deploys a wide cast of characters, each deftly individualised, though we particularly follow the actions and reactions of one woman, First Lieutenant Anat Asher, media and education officer. Her clear-headedness and general good sense in the end help to savethe castaways from greater disaster, but she is no idealised heroine and Wilder captures well the confused muddle of human society faced with intolerable strains. The story reads like a realist novel, or like those patiently meticulous books explaining What Space Travel Will Be Like, except that it is written by a quirky author with an unusual grasp of the chaotic nature of human interactions and no very obvious 'message'.

Roger Zelazny (Ed)

The Williamson Effect TOR, 1996, 347pp, \$23.95

Review by Brian Stableford

Intense competition in the US paperback market has given rise to many different experiments in packaging, most of which attempt to multiply selling points in ingenious ways. One of the more intriguing experiments of this kind is the anthology in honour of a favourite writer, which attempts to tot up the points generated by the author's name, the editor's name and the contributors' names and then collect a sentimental bonus for the handsome gesture itself. Presumably the experiment worked well enough when Tor tried it with Andre Norton (*Moonsinger's Friends* edited by Susan Schwartz, 1985) and Isaac Asimov (*Foundation's Friends* edited by Martin H. Greenberg and introduced by Ray Bradbury, 1989), so now it is Jack Williamson's turn – except, apparently, that he has an effect rather than friends, which might or might not be construed as a compliment.

If it's the thought that counts, then this has to be reckoned a worthy book before it's even opened. Jack Williamson has been a pillar of the sf and fantasy fields since their inception; he is the only author to have published worthwhile work in every single decade since the 1920s and one of very few to have proved himself capable of producing lucid, intelligent and innovative work in his eighties. I have long been a devout admirer of his work and my mind still boggles at the delirious memory of the one occasion when I met him, at the World-SF Conference in Chengdu, when we were trapped by landslides in the Panda reservation at Wolong and the People's Army had to be mobilized to labour through the night in order to clear a passage for us (and, of course, the 200 other people who happened to be with us). I am wholeheartedly in favour of the idea of a book compiled in his honour – but I can only sympathise with the predicament of the writers invited to contribute to it.

How does one actually go about writing a story to honour another writer? Frederik Pohl – who collaborated with him on some excellent novels – offers an alternative history story in

In this she differs sharply from (say) Robert Heinlein or Orson Scott Card, where the narrative is shaped towards a doctrinal thesis, or the 'Downbelow' books of C.J. Cherryh where most of the story is seen through one character's eyes. This is no 'space western' where, in the end, might and right are confusedly interchangeable; Australasian settlement history lacks the American confidence in manifest destiny, and so does Cherry Wilder. Her narrative is all the more believable as a result.

Don't conclude that she is short on imagination: it abounds. Her characters are her own, not taken from a standard pack. The living creatures on Rhomary are interesting variants on those of Earth, and she has an android who unexpectedly begins to dream. As I read, my respect for the author grew: this is no run-of-the-mill formula novel but a genuine and absorbing story told by a perceptive writer with her own unmistakable vision. I shall now seek out her other writing and hope we shall see more of her sf.

which Jack becomes a big-time hero by virtue of never being sidetracked into sf writing. Connie Willis offers a tale of time-tourists in which Jack is one day acknowledged as a big-time hero in spite of being thus sidetracked. David Weber and Paul Dellinger provide contradictory explanations of Giles Habibula's drafting to *The Legion of Space*. John Miller gives us a sequel to *The Legion of Time*. Poul Anderson, Mike Resnick and Jane Lindskold offer sidelights to *Darker Than You Think*. Ben Bova provides serious account of the Humanoids from 'With Folded Hands', Jeff Bredenburg an unserious one, and Fred Saberhagen an account of what transpires when the Humanoids meet the Berserkers. The rest... well, the rest simply offer stories that have something in common with Jack's work – which, given that Jack's work is so wonderfully various, could be said of just about any story remotely connected with the genre. All of this work is both respectful and respectable, but I cannot help feeling that if there is to be a sequel to *The Legion of Time*, or sidelights to *Darker Than You Think*, etc, then the person to write them – and the only person who could make them authentic – is Jack Williamson.

I have to confess, feeling horribly guilty as I do so, that the only story in *The Williamson Effect* which actually seemed to me to have any interest beyond that of a generous gesture was Saberhagen's 'The Bad Machines', a *conte philosophique* which actually succeeds in adding something – if only a glorified footnote – to the implications of the original story. In saying so I do not mean to insult any of the other contributors, who were attempting to do the impossible and did so bravely; I cannot imagine that any other cast could have done better. Nor do I think that it would be wiser or safer to postpone the production of such monuments as this until a writer is dead. Perhaps, after all, the propriety of the work is secured by the observation that if people working within the sf field cannot attempt the impossible as a matter of course, who on earth will?

I don't know whether the marketplace will agree, but I give the title a bonus point for using the man's name. I could not like it even half as well if it were called *Firechild's Progeny* or *Setter Celebration*.

VECTOR 188 – SPECIAL REVIEWS SUPPLEMENT

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PULP FICTION

Paperback Reviews

edited by Tanya Brown

Gill Alderman

The Memory Palace

Voyager, 1996, £5.99, 423pp

Reviewed by Steve Jeffery

Once upon a time...

The storyteller finishes, flexes aching hands and taps a key. The words vanish into the mysterious innards of the machine. Another story is finished, a new one about to begin. Guy Kester Paradis, bestselling author of the New Mythologies and the stories of the Archmage Koschei, shuts his house, says goodbye to his ghost and takes the road for France, called by the lure of his gypsy ex-wife, Helen.

Once upon a time...

Koschei Corbillion, former Novice and now mercenary in the Brotherhood of the Green Wolf, sets aside the building of his Memory Palace and begins his own journey, called by the lure of power, the position of Archmage and his love for the sorceress Nemione.

The moment of intersection of their journeys (as of course they must) is both shocking and unexpected, so deftly handled that you only realise, with chilled awareness, just what has taken place moments before. From that point on, through Paradis' shock and delirium, the real and the fictional fully entwine to bring the storyteller and the Archmage, both uniquely and terribly maimed, to face each other in the Library of the Palace of Memory.

This is a marvellous, intricately complex and subtle book. Time and landscape constantly slip the boundaries between the Lyon of the twentieth and nineteenth century and the timeless Pagur, the Mutable City in the land of Malthassa. Characters, real and fictional, human and ghosts, cross and recur to follow their own stories in a bewildering profusion of guises. The whole book resounds with echoes and premonitions, from the opening sentence to Koschei's final footnote entry in his journal, and a large part of the fun is in catching them, or being delightfully tripped up by them later in the book ("Oh, of course..."). I won't give them away here. Partly because it would spoil much of the pleasure, and partly because, in Fermat's teasing note, there is so much in here "that this margin is too small to contain."

I don't think I've been so thoroughly delighted by a work of fantasy since Elizabeth Hand's *Winterlong* or Crowley's *Aegypt*. Gill Alderman steps up as one of our best and most accomplished fantasy writers. Highly recommended. A real treat.

David Alexander

*Star Trek Creator: The Authorised
Biography of Gene Roddenberry*
Bantam, 1996, £12.99, 599pp

Reviewed by Julie Atkin

At about six hundred pages, at times I thought that reading this would be my own five-year mission. This is not a book for the casual *Star Trek* viewer like myself; it's far too long and detailed, and I ended up skimming through whole chapters. However, the autobiography is not really intended for anyone other than hard-core *Trek* fans, who want to know the particulars of Roddenberry's life and work.

The book is fully authorised and cooperated with by its subject and his wife Majel Barrett, to the extent that the writer was one of only four people at Roddenberry's private funeral service.

Early chapters cover, in more-or-less chronological detail, Roddenberry's parents, his school life, his army training and war experience, his early first marriage, and his careers as a private pilot and then in the police force. During his time as a police officer, Roddenberry moved from being an amateur to a professional television writer, eventually leaving to become a full-time writer.

The book then covers the making of the original *Star Trek* series in some detail, focussing on Roddenberry's battles to keep the programme true to his vision of it. His and the fans' fight to keep the show on the air is covered, and eventually the story of how Roddenberry lost control of the project during the films.

It also covers the period between the ending of the original series and the first movie being planned, with Roddenberry's non-SF film, his pilots for other series that were never made, and his unfinished novel.

The autobiography features countless letters and memos to and from Roddenberry. This would be of interest to anyone with a great interest for the man and his work, but is far too long and detailed to interest a casual reader.

Nichelle Nicholls' autobiography, *Beyond Uhura*, is reviewed on page 17

Steve Perry, Stephani
Perry, David Bischoff

*Aliens Omnibus: The Female
War & 'Genocide'*
Millennium, 1996, £5.99, 574pp

Reviewed by Martyn Taylor

Novel tie-ins from a film series which plummeted after a fascinating but deeply-flawed original are not guaranteed to get me reading with enthusiasm. When you add styles which are the equivalent to "let's write the movie right here" from authors who appear never to have read a film script, much less written one, see me reaching for Valium. I was not pleasantly surprised by this offering. Film is about character-based action, but in neither story is there any character development whatsoever. Why build a character when they're going to die in two hundred pages at the most (why? because that's what the reader wants, dummy). Even Ripley, one of the most iconic figures of late twentieth-century Western culture, is nothing more than the celluloid cut-out last seen in *Alien*. As for the action: well, it bowls along on rails and will doubtless play on the widescreens of stunted 13-year-old imaginations everywhere.

Which gets me to the real reason for being mad. My kids are the market for this tripe and they deserve an awful lot better than this, the equivalent of handing a cobra to a child who's asking for bread. I hope Millennium's accountant sleeps well.

Greg Bear

Legacy
Legend, 1996, £5.99, 410pp

Reviewed by Colin Bird

Even in a hard SF universe crowded with Big Dumb Objects Greg Bear's the Way, discovered in *Eon* and explored in *Eternity*, is an impressive creation. For those not familiar, the Way is an artificially created universe which leads to an infinite variety of stars and other dimensions. In *Legacy* Bear reins in his Space Opera instincts and sets the story on just one of the worlds accessible via the Way.

The imaginative leap this time comes from an extraordinary world of competing ecosystems – a fascinating consistent and believably alien, non-evolutionary biology.

Lamarkia is a new Eden, discovered when the Way was first being explored. A visionary leader takes four thousand dissidents and escapes from the Hexamon, who administer the Way, and begins a colony on Lamarkia. They are forgotten for a number of years as war rages in the Way until the Hexamon send an agent, Ser Olmy, to discover what has happened to the dissidents.

A brief prologue provides all the introductory information you need before Olmy is thrown straight into the unfamiliar environment. It's a gripping story from the start as Olmy must determine what success the dissidents have made of their colonisation efforts and try to come to an understanding of the world's biology. The narrative slackens as Olmy joins a sea expedition but the planet throws up plenty of zoological wonders to sustain a sense of fascination.

Olmy's discoveries of political infighting amongst the dissidents reminds me of some of the weaker moments in his last book, *Moving Mars*, but this time Bear hangs his story on a more attention-grabbing idea, the alien environment of the planet Lamarkia. This inventive novel continues the recent rejuvenation of hard SF along with books from Baxter, Robinson, Hamilton and Banks.

David Brin

The Uplift War

Orbit Books, 1996, £6.99, 638pp

Reviewed by John D. Owen

The Uplift War is the third in David Brin's celebrated 'Uplift' series, preceded by *Sundiver* and *Startide Rising*, all three now reprinting alongside the hardback publication of *Brightness Reef*.

The Uplift War fits in after *Startide Rising*, the events of that book precipitating the new problems to be solved in *The Uplift War*. The planet of Garth has come under the human control, the newest race on the Galactic scene. Evolved to intelligence and advanced technologies by their own efforts, humans are regarded with suspicion and hatred by many races in the Five Galaxies, flouting long-established protocols for the 'uplifting' of client races owing servitude along the way to patrons, in long chains of obligation going back to the mythical Progenitors. To the more conservative races, humans are wofflings, and are even more hated because they have uplifted two other Terran species, the dolphins and chimpanzees.

One race, the bird-like Gubru, take desperate risks to gain supposed secrets found in *Startide Rising*. They invade Garth, holding the human population to ransom. However, in their arrogance, the Gubru underestimate the resources of the humans' 'improperly uplifted' clients, the chimps. With the aid of a young human man and a young female Tymbrimi (a race strongly supportive of humans), the chimps organise resistance against the invaders, both to fight back against an aggressor, but also to keep secret an illegal experiment being conducted by the Terrans.

Brin's storytelling abilities come to the fore in *The Uplift War*. He handles a large cast extremely well, and the course of the war is skillfully laid out to make a thrilling, nail-biting storyline that moves at breakneck speed. The whole Uplift series so far has been excellent, high quality space opera, compulsive reading. The only complaint is the length of time between volumes (nine years between this book and *Brightness Reef*).

David Brin's most recent novel, *Brightness Reef*, is reviewed on page 4.

John Brosnan

Have Demon, Will Travel

Arrow, 1996, £4.99, 168pp

Reviewed by Kathy Taylor

This book is the sequel to *Damned and Fancy*. If you enjoyed the first book, and some reviewers seemed to, you will probably enjoy this one.

The story revolves around a journalist, Travis Thomson and his companions from *Damned and Fancy*, Jack, Sharon and Beatrice.

Travis is the 'hero', Sharon is a naked Succubus, Beatrice is a Fairy Princess and Jack is a Demon and a sometime sex-film director. The 'villains' are a vampire prince called Valerie and his 'sorcerer sidekick' Damian.

Despite the interesting sounding cast list the book lacks originality. It is a somewhat farcical 'comedy' which relies on incongruous visual imagery and juvenile humour for its jokes. The fact that Sharon is naked is not in itself funny, but this fact is used almost ad nauseum. There is one wonderful scene involving a bank robbery and, indirectly, a small furry animal, which made me laugh aloud but for the most part most of the humour didn't work.

It's a quick and easy read, and might pass the time if you're stranded on a British Rail station, but with so many good books available I do not recommend this mediocrity.

Richard Calder

Dead Things

Voyager, 1996, £4.99, 199pp

Reviewed by Steve Jeffery

This book worries me. *Dead Things*, a sequel one supposes to *Dead Girls* and *Dead Boys*, is a near catalogue of fetishistic pornographic imagery, violence and murder. This whole intensely uneasy, even unhealthy, mixture is wrapped in some of the most tortuous and convoluted prose imaginable: sentences that start, almost immediately lead off into endless diversions and digressions before finally collapsing, exhausted and mostly unresolved a page later. The style is either Tristram Shandy out of Burroughs, or the results of someone who has terminally overdone on early Ballard. As far as I can make out, there are girl dolls, sex vampires – the Lilim, and a man, or alien, or construct, called Dagon, a renegade Elohim, whose mission is to kill them all and unleash a weapon, the Reality Bomb, that will destroy the world of Meta (whatever that is). By about the middle of the book very few things have actually happened, although we know more than we probably care to about the protagonist, through his warped psychopathy of sex and death and his incestuous love for his dead-girl sister Primavera.

After some 100 or so pages of this incredibly convoluted prose, it transpires that Dagon is the Reality Bomb, an artificial being, armed and triggered with an information virus – that, detonated in the core sanctum of the Lilim nymphenberg, will propagate back and forth through time and space as a sort of anti-meme against the sex-death universe of Meta. At the climax (sorry) of the book, this is staged against a diversionary Elohim attack on the nymphenberg that reads like a fetishistic snuff movie, or a shoot-out in a lingerie department.

I don't know what Calder's up to. If this is supposed to be deep psychological comment then it's gone right past me, and I can't decide whether what remains is completely risible or deeply unhealthy. I can't get on with this book; I don't know what it's trying to say, but if it's not trying to say anything then what's left has the taste of a brutal wet dream fantasy.

I may be wrong. I sincerely hope so.

David Callinan

Fortress Manhattan

Gollancz, 1996, £5.99, 316pp

Reviewed by Susan Badham

Instead of buying this book you could buy a bottle of wine, or a cinema ticket, or six National Lottery tickets, or... Frankly, it doesn't matter what you buy, as long as you don't waste your money on this novel.

There is real science fiction, a literature of ideas that deals with the consequences of imagined changes, in the past, in the future, technology, the way people relate to one another... and then there is accessory science fiction, that doesn't want to deal with real ideas. The purveyors of this stuff just want the images of ravens steel-jacketed mutants, designer inequality, technology that goes bang a lot. They want the MTV level images of a fifteenth-rate science fiction film and they don't care how unreal it gets.

Example: the hero of this book 'moves carefully' while rats are nibbling at his lower legs. I don't think so.

The women are a collection of perfect bodies hewn from the living stereotype, but then so are all the other characters, except that they lack the plausibility of your average stereotype. The plot is nonsensical and the writing is the best thing about it, which isn't saying much.

**Allan Cole &
Chris Bunch**

Reviewed by Lynne Bispham

The Kingdoms of the Night
Legend, 1995, £5.99, 450pp

The third volume is not usually the best place to begin reading a fantasy series, but *The Kingdoms of the Night*, although it refers back to earlier books in 'The Far Kingdoms' series, is self-contained – and it is such a gripping read that I shall be rushing out to buy its predecessors.

Almaric Antero, hero of the first volume – *The Far Kingdoms* – wealthy merchant-adventurer and discoverer of the legendary Far Kingdoms and their magic, has grown old. His wife, who he brought back from the Far Kingdoms to his home in the city of Orissa, has died, while his son, who hopes to inherit his trade empire, is proving to be a most unworthy heir. It seems to Almaric that his life is hardly worth living, but he is jolted out of his self-pity by the arrival of Janela, a young woman claiming to be the great-granddaughter of the wizard Janos Greycloak, Almaric's one-time companion on his original voyage of exploration.

Janela convinces Almaric that she is indeed Greycloak's great-granddaughter, and furthermore that the lands Almaric and Greycloak discovered were not the Far Kingdoms of legend. Soon Almaric finds himself talked into joining Janela on a voyage to discover the true Far Kingdoms, a voyage that some magical power inimical to Orissa seems determined to prevent. Before they have even cast anchor, Almaric and Janela are facing assassination attempts and demons, and the journey that follows proves to be both dangerous and fantastical – and a triumph of the authors' imaginations. *The Kingdoms of the Night* is the most enjoyable fantasy I have read this year – highly recommended.

Various Writers/Artists

Superman: Eradication

Titan, 1995, £8.99, 160pp

Moench, Gulacy & Austin

Batman vs. Predator 2

Titan, 1995, £4.99, 140pp

Grant & Breyfogle

Batman: The Last Arkham

Titan, 1996, £8.99, 110pp

Reviewed by Colin Bird

Comics and movies have become inextricably linked with characters leaping from one form to the other. The transfer used to be one way, with characters who were successful in comics being tried on the big screen. Now we're getting traffic the other way with Dark Horse turning *Aliens* and *Predator* into chart-topping comic books. The symbiotic relationship means comic books are trading invention for trade mark recognition. Surprisingly, the form is still a breeding ground for experimentation and originality.

The tired old-style books are still being churned out very profitably and *Superman: Eradication* is a prime example. With an ever-changing roster of artists and writers it's no surprise that the storyline is rambling and the artwork anodyne. For the record, the Eradicator is a Kryptonian artefact which slowly changes Superman into a cold-hearted Fascist. Several lacklustre battles with foes, old and new, are mixed into the blend.

Batman has always been a more compelling super-hero, particularly in the hands of such expert writers as Frank Miller, Grant Morrison and Alan Grant who explore the character's psychotic side. *Batman vs. Predator 2: Bloodmatch* has strong artwork and furious action aplenty but is too conventional to excite much passion. Fans of the Dark Knight will find plenty to enjoy but this story lacks depth.

Batman: The Last Arkham is more original. A deliciously witty and intelligent tale from DC's 'Shadow Of The Bat' strand of self-

contained stories. The Bat mythology is suitably expanded to include a Hannibal Lecter-style serial killer, incarcerated in Arkham Asylum. There is lots of cape-straining action, an effective new super villain and a subtext of behavioural psychology based upon anthropologist B.F. Skinner's theories (honest!). The image of Batman, breaking free from a straitjacket, which graces the cover of this handsome graphic novel, is a clue to Grant's take on the super hero – simultaneously serious and tongue in cheek. Great use of the frame throughout by artist, Norm Breyfogle, who has a strong, kinetic, style. A treat for Batfans.

Greg Egan

Axiomatic

Millennium, 1996, £4.99, 368pp

Reviewed by Steve Palmer

This, the first volume of Greg Egan's short stories to be published, collects eighteen works into a clear, incisive volume. Many of the short stories were originally published in *Interzone*, and something of that magazine's leanings comes through in this collection – a certain near-future, often dystopian yet vivid, atmosphere that mingles what little there is of the human side of cyberpunk with more meaningful exploration of the human psyche.

Particular gems are 'Learning to be Me', in which a jewel is placed in a child's brain and attempts to copy the identity of the human by biochemical means (or does it?); and the classic *Interzone* tale 'The Cutie' from 1989, in which a desperate man takes a DNA kit (Cabbage Patch doll?) and ends up discovering the meaning of suffering.

Quantum bizarreness appears when a man is mapped into Cantor dust, and the infinite is created – but is identity lost? ('The Infinite Assassin'). Elsewhere, the abstract becomes real to a man who recreates AIDS for the purpose of spreading ethics – or what he supposes are ethics, since he believes in God ('The Moral Viriologist').

There are few duds in this book, and far more by way of unusual, imaginative and just plain macabre ideas. The fascination with issues of human identity lends a humane angle to the collection, while the sometimes creepy imagination (Greg Egan would have been a Gothic writer in another century) sends it into the SF stratosphere. An excellent book and a good introduction to Egan's work.

Clayton Emery

Magic: The Gathering

– Shattered Chains

Magic: The Gathering

– Final Sacrifice

Boxtre, 1995, £5.99, 312pp/312pp

Reviewed by Lynne Bispham

These books are the last two volumes in a series based on the 'Magic: The Gathering' trading card game. Presumably they are aimed at younger readers, for their vocabulary and plots can only be described as unsophisticated; but why this age group (say, 10-13 years) should have such uninspiring fantasy inflicted on them is anyone's guess. These books may do well enough as extended scenarios for the 'Magic' game, but as fiction they are dire. In *Shattered Chains*, Gull the Woodcutter is leading a ragged army in a crusade to rid the Domains of evil wizards. Gull has no military ability, but a warrior-woman, Rakel, sent by the City of Benalia to assassinate Gull, sees the righteousness of his cause and trains his army. Gull's sister, Greensleeves, is shown how to use her magical powers by the druid Chaney. A magical artifact in the army's keeping, a green brain, takes the shape of a stone helm which may hold the secret of how the wizards can be defeated...

I have not played the 'Magic' trading card game, but from the evidence of *Shattered Chains* and *Final Sacrifice*, it is likely to consist of 'fights' between 'characters', as many of these games do. The plot of *Final Sacrifice* consists mainly of battles between Gull, Greensleeves and their followers, and the wizards and their armies of orcs, goblins and phantoms. Gull and Greensleeves are first seen attacking individual wizards. The evil wizards band together to attack Gull and

his army. Meanwhile, Gull and Greensleeves are searching for the ancient ruins of the College of the Sages, where the secret of the wizards' defeat may be buried. Unsurprisingly, there is a final battle in which the wizards are defeated. Unfortunately, even the triumph of Good over Evil is not enough to make these books a worthwhile read.

Frances Gordon

The Devil's Piper

Headline, 1995, £5.99, 534pp

Reviewed by Jon Wallace

The Black Chant. Feature of music with dark overtones through the ages. Said to have power enough to raise the dead from the grave. When Isarel West inherits a cottage in Ireland from his grandfather, the composer Jude Weissman, he finds the long-lost score of the Devil's Piper Suite and plays the music...

This novel doesn't hang about. By page forty, a tomb has opened and a renegade high priest, dead for centuries has revived and is prowling the Earth. And the action just whizzes on from there.

Isarel is enlisted by Brother Ciaran to help him return the undead Ahasuerus to the tomb that his Order has guarded for centuries. But when the coffin is stolen, Isarel, Ciaran, Kate Kendal, a music promoter and local lass Moira band together to follow the thieves across Europe to the dread castle of Eisenach. This is to be the site of a revival of Nazism that is set to devastate the planet...

I was prepared not to like this book, based on the blurb which seemed to describe a hackneyed plot, and equally hackneyed characters. But the actual plot is better than that, and the characters are well enough drawn that we get to know and like them sufficiently to care about what happens to them.

The story weaves back and forth between Ahasuerus' death and his past awakenings, Jude Weissman's experiences in Nazi-occupied Poland and the present day. This helps hold the interest and gives the characters space to do things without the reader watching them all the time.

OK. So, beginning to end action, a cast of characters that you can care about (except the baddies, then you can hiss), a bit of romance a lot of suspense. What else do you need to while away a train journey?

Colin Greenland

Seasons of Plenty

Voyager, 1996, £4.99, 485pp

Reviewed by Steve Palmer

This is a difficult book to review. On the one hand, we have Colin Greenland, the author of several superb books, highly respected, award-winning and so on. On the other hand, this – the second 'Plenty' book – gives the dizzying sensation of being frenetically active and yet entirely without plot.

If this reviewer gives anything less than a good review he will be lambasted as lacking taste, being disrespectful and so on.

To solve this dilemma: *Seasons of Plenty* is compulsive, fascinating reading that, for page after page all the way through to the end, unfolds a truly dazzling microcosm of human life on the great alien ship first encountered in *Take Back Plenty*, so that the reader's breath is taken away. The scale of the invention is enough by itself to sustain the large number of pages, and while earlier I mentioned that there seems to be no plot, there is always the subliminal suggestion that murky plot-type events are lurking beneath the parties, galas, vignettes in bars and bedrooms, and all the rest of life on Plenty. This is a novel where the reader is moved by author virtuosity.

Yet nothing seems to happen. In a nutshell, people board Plenty, go into hyperspace, travel though it, then come out at a destination that could be guessed from reading just a handful of pages (or indeed from knowing that 'Plenty' is now a trilogy).

This is a novel about human characters, about people who have a similar relation and scale to Plenty as do the characters of Brian Aldiss' 'Helliconia' books to their world: the tiny against the huge. Tabitha Jute, while central, is paradoxically just one of the teeming many, and it could be argued that she is not the most interesting character aboard, from the point of view of the reader.

Anyone who read and loved *Take Back Plenty* – and I am one – will love this. Perhaps I have missed something, but this novel seems a very different kettle of fish. Can't wait for the final installment, which doubtless will be different again.

Douglas Hill

Cade 1: Galaxy's Edge

Bantam, 1996, £3.50, 190pp

Reviewed by Andy Mills

Jaxie Cade is nineteen years old, well-built and good-looking. He's also a criminal and is being taken back to prison by the redoubtable (attractive and female) bounty hunter Raishe Kelme. But he's got a data-slice which could lead them to the legendary Phantom Planet, which in turn would mean riches galore. Will Raishe get dragged along with our hero? Yes! Will they be chased a lot? Yes! Will there be an awful lot of shooting? Yes! Yes! (But no-one actually gets killed – this is what used to be called a juvenile.) Are there nasty aliens? Yes! Yes! Yes! Will Cade and Raishe find the Phantom Planet? Don't be daft – this is the first volume in a trilogy!

An undemanding, if somewhat repetitive, read for kids, and one which is (mercifully or not) free of any moral message.

Robin Hobb

Assassin's Apprentice: The Farseer Trilogy

Volume 1

HarperCollins, 1996, £5.99, 488pp

Reviewed by Alan Fraser

A fantasy trilogy from a new author is an incredible cliché – reviewing an excellent anthology of fantasy from mostly new authors, I was dismayed to read in the biographical notes that nearly every one of them was currently working on his or her 'fantasy trilogy'. Yuk. Now here comes Californian Robin Hobb with the first book in 'The Farseer Trilogy', set in a mediaeval world depicted in the obligatory map, where some people have special powers, here called the Skill.

Under the circumstances, giving this book a good review would be like lauding a Mills & Boon romance – "Yes, I know it's written to a strict formula, but despite that it's really rather good..." Instant credibility gap, especially when the thing is damned by being described on the back as "combining the magic of Ursula Le Guin's *A Wizard of Earthsea* with the epic mastery of Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*".

However... *Assassin's Apprentice* is actually worth reading. In his tale of Fitz, the Crown Prince's bastard who is hidden away in the palace and forced to learn to become a secret killer for his grandfather the King, Hobb has combined an exciting story with good characterisation. He gets Fitz into an impossible situation, gets him out of it ingeniously, and then – just as I breathed a sigh of relief – puts poor Fitz back in a worse mess than before, and this time with no exit in sight. Consequently, I'm keen to follow Fitz's story – I can, of course, tell from the series title that he does indeed develop his Skill.

Apprentice has already been followed by *Royal Assassin* in hardback (Chapter 1 of which is included here), with *Assassin's Quest* to follow, and Hobb is already working on a new series. HarperCollins obviously have faith in him. If he keeps this up and manages to break away from formula fantasy, he'll be an author to watch.

Gwyneth Jones

Kairos

Gollancz, 1995, £5.99, 262pp

Reviewed by K. V. Bailey

A lightly revised edition. Its landscapes are those of progressively deteriorating regions – London, Birmingham, Brighton. The disintegration of civil life into an anarchy of sects is partly related to the effects of the eponymous drug, the action of which, analogous to the release of energy in the breaking of atomic bonding, dismantles the mind, infecting it at the interface of the brain's electronics with

the state of awareness "down where everything turns into everything else".

The story starts with an ending; and an apocalyptic motif tokened by a trumpet-bearing angel. That ending is of a lesbian love relationship, one partner of which, Sandy Brize, becomes chief protagonist throughout the central strand of a plot infinitely complicated by deceptions, dreams and hallucinations. She is 'foster-mothering' Candide, the small son of her ex-lover Otto, on a quest through Black Country badlands to recover his hostaged terrier-bitch, Vera. Vera was taken by the activist organisation BREAKTHRU as a lever to regain a canister of the reality-changing drug. Tiny but alive, the canister is a Kairos bomb. The dog is found, tortured and dying. They bury it – and return with it alive and whole, and with the Kairos which, released by Sandy, produces the condition of the novel's last chapter, an idyllically upbeat one in which characters, surviving or 'resurrected', speculate on what kind of 'end of the world' they have passed through: perhaps one of mass hallucinations when the galaxy may have orbited across an area of turbulence.

I found the novel's most significant allegorical drift to lie focussed on the myth-personifying Jack Russell terrier, of whom Otto reflects towards the end of the book: "it was awesome to think that this noisy, self-important little bundle of flesh had been, for the duration of the nightmare... surrogate for the whole, the whole good bad and indifferent sum of things". Other readers may tease out other emphases and meanings. It's that kind of book.

Katherine Kerr

Daggerspell

Voyager, 1996, £5.99, 461pp

Reviewed by K. V. Bailey

I doubt whether this, now revised, has ever been out of print since it appeared a decade ago to originate the Deverry romances. The edition provides all the usual fantasy apparatus, including an aid to identifying who's who and, reincarnated, will be who during the three time-spans of the story's progress. As language and lore suggest, Deverry is a Celtic medieval kingdom that never was, one with its own imagined history, geography and variety of tribal alliances. Such is the mundane ambience, vividly created with forests, meadows, hill-forts and walled towns. It is home to a nobility much given to feuding and honour-avenging. The peasantry keep inns, cut wood, hammer at forges, in a rough but stable existence. Deeds of the characters (predominantly highborn), however seemingly random, are subject to the Wyrd – that inescapable destiny constant over incarnations. Jill, born and left motherless in a remote village, is a central character in the culminating time-band. Her life becomes a military vagabondage in the company of her outcast swordsman father, until it brings her into the camps and palaces of the highborn, whose Wyrd she unwittingly shares. Centuries earlier she had been Lissa, the wife of a Bard, and had been Brangwen, princely affianced Lady of the Falcon Clan who, after episodes of amatory intrigue and incest, drowned herself. At the eleventh-century Deverry courts Jill acts out her reincarnated peers, though in mutual ignorance, purgatorial trials, tragedies – and ecstasies.

What I've called the mundane ambience is interpreted by an otherworldly one. The Prologue sets the scene. In a hall of light the Lords of Wyrd, committing to another birth the sentence that will be Jill, impress on her that she is "in [her] very soul" one belonging to the "dweomer" – that is, to the magic inherent in cosmic harmonies... That is why throughout girlhood Jill has help from elemental spirits – the Wildfolk. Such alliances are also afforded to the preternaturally long-lived (not reincarnated) herban, Neyn, who once, as Prince Galrion, had loved Brangwen / Jill. He alone, encountering their reincarnations, can recognise his peers, providing at times magical assistance to Jill and certain others. His ensorcellings, shape-changings and out-of-the-body counterings of the "dark dwomer" are among the best things in the novel, his thaumaturgy acceptable to the imagination if one allows the author's (Glossary) premise that the universe has "various nonphysical planes".

Mercedes Lackey &

Larry Dixon

Reviewed by Norman Beswick

The White Gryphon

Millenium, 1996, £4.99, 305pp

This is Book Two of 'The Mage Wars', preceded by *The Black Gryphon* and followed by *The Silver Gryphon*. The events therein take place 1500 years before those of the Valdemar series. People who have read these works may already know what to expect; I did not, and approached my task with mild curiosity.

Skandranon the gryphon, and his human and gryphon allies, have overcome the evil mage Maar and established an eyrie city on a cliffside elsewhere. They discover a criminal in their midst and dispatch him into exile. Then the ships appear, coming from a proud black nation to the south, the Haighta.

Skandranon and other leaders accept the invitation to visit the Emperor's court. But there, a series of murders appears to implicate the Gryphonians. Tension mounts until the murderer (guess who?) is exposed.

This is basically a simple tale, made longer by extended descriptions of the reasoning processes and misgivings of the protagonists. The Gryphonians are brave, high-minded and good; the Haighta people are brave, high-minded and good, but locked into an unhelpful mindset; the murderer is irredeemably evil and treacherous. Guilt or innocence is determined by Truthsayers, and magic is supposedly unreliable because of "mage-storms" (but in practice works very well for the main characters). In the end almost everyone is happier, except the murderer.

It's easy to read, evenly paced, and embellished with drawings of the main characters. No doubt the authors can mass-produce many more tales to the same formula, but for me one is enough.

Book 3 of 'The Mage Wars', *The Silver Gryphon*, is reviewed on page 15

Ursula Le Guin

The Dispossessed

Voyager, 1996, £4.99, 319pp

Reviewed by Andy Sawyer

It's slightly shocking that *The Dispossessed*, first published in 1974, is over twenty years old: twenty years in which the most obvious change towards the society it blueprints in the use of the term 'partner' to mean husband or wife, common-law or otherwise. Certainly when it was first published it was reviewed in Anarchist journals, and politicians on the radical wing of the Labour Party (stop giggling at the back there – it did so have one!) were citing it as a major influence.

This initial paragraph, however, is *meant* to be polemic. *The Dispossessed* may not be a handbook for revolution but first, and I would not write off Anarchist ideas just yet; and second, it was and is Le Guin's finest novel (although the currently-underrated *Always Coming Home* is more ambitious and explores her Taoist anarchism in more depth and in an equally provocative setting). (Thirdly, I suppose I had better add, I would not write off Le Guin, who is now writing more and better science fiction than she has for years). But for the benefit of those to whom all this may be new: Urras and Annarees are a double-planet system revolving around the star we know as Tau Ceti. Urras is rich and populous, with inhabited nations which are roughly the equivalent of our West, former Marxist Soviet Union, and Third World, fought over by the two powerful blocs. Annarees is hard and barren, settled by utopian anarchists inspired by the philosopher Odo. Over the years the Odonians have lost their romantic edge to grapple with the problems of survival but they still live without government, without property. From Annarees, on his own initiative and opposed by most of his people, the physicist Shevek crosses to Urras to work on his life's goal – the reconciliation of the rival Physics of Sequence and Simultaneity which may give the secret of instantaneous communication and interstellar travel far superior to that which the Hainish have already brought.

Each image – Urras and Annarees; individual and society; Sequence and Simultaneity; physics and ethics; the imaginary world Le Guin constructs and the 'real' world we live in – plays with and reinforces the other. Shevek sees the ideals of Odonianism becoming

lost as the Annas collectives focus inwards and petty dominances return. Urras lives up to the stereotype he has been taught, but there is also idealism, and struggle. The subtitle of the book is "an ambiguous utopia". There is, of course, no utopia which has not been ambiguous, but in reminding us of this simple truth Le Guin allows us to confront our own political and social clichés. *The Dispossessed* is one of science fiction's classics. It is true to say that it may well be one of the century's classics of any mode of literature; but if it is, it is because science fiction is so tellingly and positively the right medium for this sort of speculation.

Bentley Little

Dark Dominion

Headline, 1996, £6.99, 505pp

Reviewed by Stephen Payne

Ah, the evils of drink. When Dion moves with his mum to a new life in Napa Valley, California, his only worry is how he will fit in with the local teenagers – that is, until he meets Penelope. Penelope lives with five women whom she calls 'mother', and together they run the Daneam Vineyard up the valley. Initially, nobody much drinks their wine, but then a series of violent murders coincide with a run on demand for the stuff and eventually Dion puts two and two together. By then it's too late, of course, and nature is already running its course. The Napa Valley is drunk on the women's wine and it all leads to both sex and violence of the most explicit kind.

There is a reason for all of this. Dion is actually (it turns out) the god Dionysus reborn, and the women are part of a cult, Maenads, sworn to nurture him in his ultimate aim of world domination. As a potentiality for world domination goes, I wouldn't put ancient gods at the top of the list – bereft of a gothic framework they're most certainly not scary – and if Little is trying to play in the same sandpit as Clive Barker or Stephen King then I think he's missed the point somewhat. Oh well, I'm sure if there is a lesson in all of this then it's something very moral about the consumption of alcohol. Burp.

Maureen F. McHugh

Half the Day is Night

Orbit, 1996, £6.99, 352pp

Reviewed by Sue Thomason

This novel is a thriller, an in-depth study of two characters in relationship to each other, and an evocation of film-noir alienation and oppression. It takes place in Caribe, an underwater state; an artificial environment providing constant darkness, constant light, cold, damp, plenty of bare concrete, and constant overwhelming pressure. Here the conditions that support human life are maintained rather badly, at great cost. The rich are comfortable, the poor breathe bad air and take illegal drugs to stay warm. Caribe is an unsustainable, corrupt, urban-tech hell; like most cities, in fact.

Jean David Dai is a young man of Vietnamese extraction, invalidated out of an African war. He takes a job in Caribe as a bodyguard to Mayla Ling, a wealthy banker. The job is supposed to be a piece of window-dressing, designed primarily to satisfy the terms of Mayla's personal insurance. Mayla, unsure what she wants for herself, is lured into corrupt business dealing and attracts the attention of a terrorist group. David's job becomes real.

Events force both Mayla and David out of their chosen jobs and social roles. Mayla, the woolly-minded woman of privilege, is forced to confront a reality different from anything she has previously known or encountered. David, whose war experiences have convinced him that 'civilisation' and 'society' are ultimately meaningless games, retains his integrity without difficulty. Expecting nothing, and clear about what he wants, he meets life calmly and resourcefully.

The novel's SF element, its underwater future-time setting, is competently handled, but it's very much background rather than foreground. Its main purpose is to set up and maintain a 'pathetic fallacy' in which the story's environment closely mirrors its characters' emotions. The story's main study is character – two characters under pressure.

Recommended to fans of agitated depression or character novels.

Michael Moorcock

Jerusalem Commands

Phoenix, 1996, £6.99, 577pp

Reviewed by Joseph Nicholas

The Pyat sequence is certainly taking its time. The first volume, *Byzantium Endures*, appeared in 1981; this third novel first appeared in hardcover in 1992; and there is no sign yet of the fourth and last, which will take his story up to 1940. But if the sequence's publication has been drawn out, so has the story each volume tells; there are, one feels, long stretches of *Jerusalem Commands* in which little happens, but takes a lot of pages.

The novel begins with Pyat becoming a film star in the last days of the silent era, but being forced to flee the US when his past activities with the Ku Klux Klan are uncovered. Crossing the Atlantic with a bunch of rogues to set up a film company in Egypt, he resumes his career, but – as ever – is too self-deceiving to see how he is being exploited. Eventually he escapes, drifts westward across the Sahara in a balloon, and comes down in Morocco, where he becomes an aircraft designer for the Pasha of Marrakesh, whom Pyat sees as the Moslem saviour who will sweep the Jews, Africans and everyone else he loathes into oblivion before joining with the Christian dictators of Europe to march against the Bolshevik hordes in the East. And if a hundred pages had been lopped out – a paragraph or two here, a digression there – the story might have been less of the slog it actually is.

Perhaps it's just that nothing in Pyat's life – and thus nothing in the successor volumes – can match the chaos and drama of the Russian Revolution depicted in *Byzantium Endures*. Perhaps, too, the character of Pyat himself has become less interesting – a thoroughly unpleasant egomaniac who assures us that he never blames himself for anything, after three volumes he's no more unpleasant than he was at the start. To elaborate his history is not the same as to elaborate his personality.

Nevertheless, one looks forward to the fourth volume, whenever it might emerge; to Pyat's encounters with Mussolini (certainly) and Hitler (perhaps), and to his response to their anti-communism and anti-Semitism. Will he recognise in them the logical culmination of his own obsessions? Or will he merely deceive himself, and reject the blame, all over again?

Christopher Moore

Blood-Sucking Fiends

Black Swan, 1995, £6.99, 317pp

Reviewed by Liam Proven

Christopher Moore is a good writer. Far too good, at first glance, to be jumping on bandwagons, when he could be chasing Bookers instead. But I'm glad he is; the beautifully-turned descriptive passages of *Blood-Sucking Fiends* would be wasted on the jaded palettes of the literati, who wouldn't dream of lowering themselves to peruse a vampire novel, for heaven's sake. Let alone a funny vampire novel.

Time for a cliché: Moore burst onto the humorous fantasy scene some years ago with the witty and occasionally disturbing *Practical Demonology*, which blends comedy with horror in a slightly uneasy mix reminiscent of Mary Gentle's *Gravels*. Like his earlier novel, *Fiends* is primarily a funny book, with moments of unpleasantness. The protagonist, Jody Stroud, is introduced in what is apparently a brutal rape, which certainly grabs the attention and pretty much compels the reader's sympathy, but by the middle of the scene we know what's going on: she's being deliberately made into a vampire.

And so it goes: what happens when a modern, young, independent city-girl – "I can open jars and kill spiders on my own. I can balance a checkbook and check the oil in my car." – is suddenly turned into a vampire? Here, as with most contemporary vampire tales, the undead are largely sympathetic characters, and the state of vampirism is in some ways enviable.

Given the sub-genre in which he's writing, it's more-or-less compulsory at this point to mention Pratchett. Well, *Good Omens* is a fair comparison. Moore is funny, streetwise, and all the other things the blurb said about Pratchett and Neil Gaiman together, and *Blood-Sucking Fiends* gave me more amusement than any of Pterry's [sic] recent books – had to say. Those unfamiliar with contemporary

American lifestyles (o lucky few!) or contemporary vampire stories might miss some of the nuances, but they will still get a generous measure of enjoyment from this; as for me, I'm so impressed that I'm off to find a copy of his second novel, *Coyote Blue*...

Lincoln Preston

Reviewed by Liam Proven

Oh, dear. There's a terrible monster, hiding in the dark, hunting down unsuspecting people and eating their brains. No, really - this is actually the story of *Relic*. What's more, it's the plot, too.

Like Red Dwarf's Grant Naylor, Lincoln Preston is actually two people. Douglas Preston, apparently, provided the knowledge of dinosaurs (he wrote a book about them once) and the New York Museum of Natural History; meanwhile, Lincoln Child, a horror editor, donated the knowledge of writing suspense. Put the duo together, and the result is a bit of a mish-mash: the basic storyline is predictable, right down to the traditional twist-in-the-tail, but its twists and turns along the way do hold some surprises. The monster is the whole core of the book, and it's described by lots of impressive-sounding scientific doubletalk, but unlike, say, *Jurassic Park*, there's no real science behind it.

They obviously did some research to obtain the jargon, but not very much: the idea of a half-mammal half-dinosaur monster, which has to feed on a strange waterlily that contains human hormones, is patently absurd; the evolutionary theories expounded by certain characters are nonsense; and the amazing computer program, the Genetic Extrapolator, which can describe any organism from a DNA sample, is actually impossible.

Since the book was obviously (ahem) 'inspired' by Michael Crichton's work, it's a pity that they didn't invest the effort to make it plausible. Still, it's a page-turner: even while amused at the 'weird science', I wanted to know what they were going to do next. Often, I could guess - for instance, mostly, nice people live, nasty ones get eaten; in this book, personality failings tend to be fatal - but the authors' experience in suspense shows, and my predictions were often wrong. If you're looking for an easy read with occasional excitement, *Relic* will pull you in and keep you, but if you're after anything more, it would be better not to start at all. What's more, like the plot, there's a twist in the tail of this story, too - *Relic* is soon to be made into a film, a medium to which it's far better suited.

Paul Preuss

Reviewed by Andy Mills

It's perhaps unfortunate for Paul Preuss that his publishers proclaim *Core* as being "the electrifying techno-thriller" because this raises the reader's expectations; expectations which are not fulfilled.

The hero of *Core* (Leidy Hudder) is the ubiquitous darling of US sf - the entrepreneurial scientist, in this case a geologist. Leidy's father invented huderite, and Cyrus Hudder's dream was to use this remarkable, metastable material to drill to the centre of the earth. But Cyrus has disappeared and is presumed dead. Leidy teams up with Marta McDougal, who is soon to be his lover but more importantly has continued Cyrus's work to the point where huderite can be manufactured. When solar flares combine with an unstable magnetic field to create havoc, it becomes imperative to reach the earth's core to find out what's going on - so Marta and Leidy obtain the funds to drill to the molten core. But someone else is deep drilling using the same technology, and their motives are by no means pure...

Preuss's huderite and its application are ingenious - cavorite for a journey to the centre of the earth - but it has to be said that the first part of the novel is very slow going - this despite its containing the best sections, those describing Leidy's early adventures in the desert. When the two drilling operations come to a climax *Core* steps up a gear and changes into a thriller. This part is good fun, though you do have to suspend your disbelief and forgive an overly feel-good

ending. A curate's egg of a book, but overall one which is... um... boring...

Kristine Katherine Rusch

Reviewed by Kathy Taylor

Sins of the Blood

Millennium, 1995, £5.99, 406pp

Sins of the Blood is set in the Pacific North-West of contemporary America. Vampires are reasonably well known within this society but the attitude to them varies considerably from state to state. In Wisconsin and the Mid-West the vampires have legal rights; and vampirism is considered an addiction to be treated by rehabilitation. In other states there is a legal vampire eradication program, and the vampire eradicators work with the police and other authorities.

The book deals not just with vampires but with their children, as one of the central premises of the book is that vampirism can be inherited. It is within this central premise that both the books uniqueness and its power to enthrall lie. The novel's central protagonists are Ben and Cammie. Ben is the child of a vampire, who becomes a vampire himself. Cammie is a professional vampire eradicator... Both have to come to terms with who and what they are and do.

The book has its gore quotient, but this is not gratuitous, and for the most part the horror comes more from the skillful build up of tension within the scenes and story. The characterisation in this book is superb. From the start of the novel, within the first tension-filled scene of a vampire eradication, the characters are portrayed as real people, with their own fears and foibles.

Sins of the Blood is an excellent book which I can recommend both to fans of contemporary vampire stories and to those new to this sub-genre.

Allison Sinclair

Reviewed by Cherith Baldrey

Legacies

Millennium, 1995, £5.99, 419pp

Legacies is set on two worlds, Burdania and Taridwyn. Generations before, a group of Burdadians left their home world to colonise Taridwyn. Activating their star drive caused great damage to Burdania; they did not even know whether anyone was left alive. Now the descendants of the original colonists are debating whether to go back.

The novel opens with the return of the surviving ship to Burdania. The result of the debate is known before the debate itself. From then on, alternating chapters explore the colonists' discovery of Burdania and the surviving inhabitants, and the events on Taridwyn leading to the decision to return - a structure reminiscent of Ursula Le Guin's *The Dispossessed*.

Legacies does not have the tight elegance of Le Guin's novel, but the dual structure makes clear the uneasiness of the colonists on both worlds. On Burdania they hide themselves, not knowing at first how much of themselves to reveal: or when. On Taridwyn they live an artificial existence in a habitat, making little attempt to integrate with the planet or its indigenous people, the *kinder'd'ain*. Neither world is their home.

The novel focusses on one character, Lian, a colonist who at first sight is more isolated than any other, because of an accident that left him physically frail and handicapped in his speech. However, he is the only colonist to have lived as a child among the *kinder'd'ain*, who accept him as far as possible as one of themselves. His closeness to their culture is a vital factor in the decision to return. Once on Burdania, it is Lian who first makes contact with the people and lives among them.

I found this novel difficult to get into, with the need right from the beginning to assimilate two alien worlds and two sets of alien references. But it was worth it. *Legacies* is a book of great sensitivity and depth. It raises questions of guilt and responsibility, and it shows that there are no easy answers.

Brian Stableford*Serpent's Blood*
Legend, 1996, £5.99, 485pp

Reviewed by John D. Owen

Serpent's Blood is the first volume in 'The Book of Genesys', a trilogy which artfully mixes a science fiction world with fantasy characters and imagery, thereby sneaking it past publishers intent on riding the fantasy bandwagon. Stableford carries it off quite nicely too: hardened fantasy readers should find nothing much to put them off the trilogy early on, while the SF elements trundle along under the plot.

Essentially, the world of *Serpent's Blood* is a lost human colony, dumped on a planet where corruption and corrosion destroy metal, stone, and just about everything else. In the millennia since they landed, the colonists have lost all their advanced technologies to the ravaging moulds and bacteria. Only their adapted human flesh is able to survive the depredations. All knowledge is passed down by word of mouth, committed to fallible memory.

The humans have spread out over the planet, forming themselves into small kingdoms. Two of the main protagonists are a vagabond Prince, Andris, and an accidentally kidnapped Princess Lucrezia (who takes after her Borgia counterpart in being a dab hand with the poisons). By various roundabout means, the two find themselves on a quest of sorts, along with a band of other assorted soldiers, merchants, thieves and misfits. Something is happening to disturb the perilous equilibrium the humans have built up on the planet, and they have to find out what it is. By the end of this volume, a number of things have been resolved, and the company is assembled for the further adventures and wonders of volumes 2 and 3.

Expressed in SF term the storyline is a standard 'recovery of lost knowledge' tale, but Stableford is a past master of setting a reader up, only to twist the plot through many contortions, arriving at a place you never ever expected to be (as in his 'Werewolves of London' trilogy). I see no reason to assume he won't do the same with *The Book of Genesys*.

Serpent's Blood will be followed shortly by *Salamander's Fire*, then *Chimera's Cradle* in 1997.

Salamander's Fire is reviewed on page 22

Bryan Talbot*The Tale of One Bad Rat*
Titan, 1996, £9.99

Reviewed by Elinor Predota

One Bad Rat, Bryan Talbot's latest graphic novel, follows an important period in the life of Helen, a girl who runs away from home, initially to London, to escape sexual abuse at the hands of her father. Then, with a rat she rescued from the school biology labs as her only friend, she travels north to the Lake District, very consciously following in the footsteps of Beatrix Potter. As she does so, she begins to take control of her life and of her imaginative gifts, using Beatrix as her role model.

The subject matter is neither speculative nor science fiction, nor is it fantasy. It is very real. It therefore has a wider potential readership than his other works. (Indeed it is already in use as an education resource.) But while saying in his epilogue that he is aware that many readers will not be familiar with the grammar of the graphic novel, he uses that grammar extremely subtly to tell the story. The movement of action across the page in the sequences without dialogue (which are perhaps the majority) draws and involves the reader, and drives the story more effectively than any number of speech bubbles could. Nor are any punches pulled in his depiction of what is going on in Helen's mind, and the boundaries between her real and imagined worlds are not explicitly drawn.

Bryan Talbot's research is impeccable, from the habits and mythology of rats, to the life of Beatrix Potter, to the use of quotes from survivors of abuse in Helen's speech. The facts fit seamlessly into the flow of the story, and indeed are an integral part of it. It is an incredibly intense and powerful piece, beautifully put together, using a traditional artistic style in conjunction with contemporary narrative techniques with neither artistry nor ease of reading being compromised. Highly recommended.

Melanie Tem*Desmodus*
Headline Feature, 1995, £5.99, 308 pp

Reviewed by Steve Jeffery

The vampire community of Tallus is getting set for the winter migration to Ambergren. During the journey, and until they return, the females will hibernate, transported in the convoy's huge eighteen-wheeler hibernacula, while the males will take advantage of their freedom from the dominant females to indulge themselves in a season of R&R.

This curious artificial adaptation brings its own problems. Few, if any, of the males can be trusted with planning the migration without constant supervision. The long journey carries dangers of breakdown or discovery. Some of the older females will not always survive the trip and will either die or be changed into the dark alien creatures fearfully referred to as the Old Women.

This season's journey brings its own special problems. Joel Desmodus fears his own mother will not survive the trip, while he himself is haunted by a dream, originally pure invention on his part but now becoming real, of his own imminent death. Without his mother's influence, the whole fractious and damaged Desmodus family threatens to fragment. His sister Alexis veers between petty, domineering cruelty and concern for her strange, brain-damaged son, Sebastian. Younger brother Rory's arrogant belligerence turns more and more to dangerous psychopathic sadism, and young Meredith has got herself pregnant and the baby will be born prematurely out of season at Ambergren.

What happens at Ambergren, when the horrifying truth of the relationship between mothers and sons is revealed, and the real nature of the sexual polarisation of the vampire community, prompts Joel to steal Meredith's new born baby and flee to the ancestral caves. The illusion of safety proves as fragile as the structure of the caves themselves.

Desmodus is certainly a different, and completely unromantic look at the vampire myth. These are not the suave and decadent vampires of Gothic fiction, but far more alien and closer to bats in their large, closed communities and social structure. While the first part of the tale is well handled, *Desmodus* unfortunately suffers from some severely contrived set pieces towards the end, as if Tem felt it necessary to suddenly tie up all the loose elements of the story rather than follow the logical dictate of the plot. The book, and the reader's involvement, falters and never quite recovers.

Ian Watson*Warhammer: Chaos Child*
Bantam, 1996, £4.99, 259pp

Reviewed by Susan Badham

This book is the third of a series set in the Warhammer 40,000 universe. The story is set in a far-distant and incredibly complicated future, in which humanity has undergone centuries of significant events and lives in a feudalistic society dominated by the ultimate struggle between good and evil. The characters are out of the ordinary, their fate reflecting that struggle. In other words, in role playing terms, they are PCs.

I expected this book to be a selection of cobbled-together descriptions from the Warhammer catalogue, and was pleased that, although he does pause to lovingly detail the armour and weaponry of subsidiary characters, the author does not fall into this trap. However, he does fall victim to another problem associated with writing the story of a richly-detailed system. The explanations of history and mythology, and their significance, do mean that the author does not have much space for fast-moving action or subtle characterisation. His characters' preoccupations tend to be connected to the history of the world to the extent that there is a lot for the new reader to digest and appreciate. If you can handle the complex mythology and layered detail then you may well enjoy this book.