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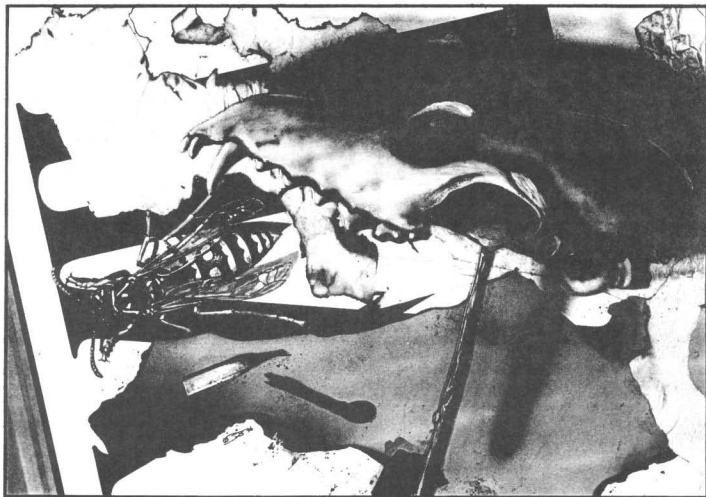
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THE CRITICAL JOURNAL OF THE BSFA

£2.25

January/February 1997

The Weaponry of Deceit



Speculations on Reality in Iain Banks' *The Wasp Factory*

Michael Marshall Smith Interview

Tim Burton Retrospective

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THE CRITICAL JOURNAL OF THE BSFA

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VECTOR

Published by the BSFA © 1997. ISSN - 0505 1448

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EDITORIAL

A View From Below Stairs

And so we enter 1997, and the first full year of Gary Dalkin and I editing articles for Vector is over, along with the first full year of Tony Cullen's sterling work on layout. Tanya Brown joined us after an issue to look after paperback reviews. We could've all fallen flat on our faces, but fortunately we also had old hand Paul Kincaid looking after hardbacks. And we also had Maureen Kincaid Speller, TAFKAMS, as managing editor and an entirely theoretical science net.

I've also kept in touch with Julie Venner and Carol Ann Green of Focus - in the postcode next door - and Chris 'Matrix' Terran, initially by e-mail, and then in person thanks to the Open University's habit of holding evening meetings in Leeds. Hopefully this teamwork will pay off in the magazines complementing each other and covering the bases.

I don't pretend it's all gone to plan - Gary and my plans for issue 185 didn't survive our first week in the job. Having to put together a tribute issue to one of the most significant British sf writers - John Brunner - was not perhaps the pleasantest place to start. Nor did we take pleasure in following this up with obituaries for Bob Shaw. Thanks are due to Robert Edgar, Bob Ford, Dave Langford, Andy Sawyer and James White for producing the goods.

More satisfying was watching the Delany and Robinson issues come into focus, along with the sudden realisation (when reading the printed magazine) that the Cognitive Mapping piece on Islands of course invoked an additional Robinson. Thanks to Dave M. Roberts we have begun to cure Vector of its frequent blindspot to media sf, with John Ashbrook on board (and both Gary and myself are both avid film-goers) this is something we aim to continue. Oh, and YA fiction and fantasy and and - well, we don't anticipate running out of ideas this side of the millennium.

So what of 1996? New novels from Gibson and Sterling, and from Baxter and Banks. The Crow Road hit the small screen, rather satisfyingly, I felt. Meanwhile Robinson completed his Mars Trilogy, Simmons added to the Hyperion Cantos and Jeter wrote another *Blade Runner* novel. Second novels came from Ken MacLeod (more Mars, sort of, and a brief cameo from the Scottish Convention) and Michael Marshall Smith.

Film was perhaps a slack year, with the juggernaut that was *Independence Day* sweeping all before it. Even mainstream cinema had a dull year, apparently composed entirely of chicks movies. Still, we had new films from Gilliam and the Coen Brothers to keep me happy.

The academic machine has generated four conferences on sf - five if you count mine from '95 - in Liverpool, London, Luton and Warwick. The Liverpool MA goes from strength to strength, as does the SFFC and FoF, even if the SFF itself seems to have been vanished. Edward James tells me that a new MA will be starting in Reading this October. (Alph would insist that I brag about my doctoring at this point, and make a single *entendre* about Dicks).

By the time you read this, the Clarke Award shortlist will have been finalised, and the call for the reviewers' poll will have gone out. And then there's the BSFA Award. So 1996 shades into 1997. Times present, and times past, are both contained in shades future. Or something.

In the meantime, roll out the barrel to drink out the old year ... h'm, this doesn't taste like Theakstons... I think it could be sherry.

Hull - December 1996

by Andrew Butler

The British Science Fiction Association Ltd.

Limited by guarantee. Company No. 921500.

Registered Address: 60 Bournemouth Road, Folkestone, Kent. CT19 5AZ.

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The Weaponry of Deceit

Speculations on Reality in *The Wasp Factory* by Kev P. McVeigh

The principal plot motivation in Iain Banks's Gothic novel *The Wasp Factory* is the threatened return of the narrator's brother, Eric Cauldhame, from the asylum in which he has been incarcerated for some years. This imminent invasion of the world Frank Cauldhame has created for himself precipitates a personal crisis in which his true nature is ultimately revealed. By the close of the book, however, Eric has not actually made a substantial appearance, an absence which provokes the question: does Eric really exist, or is he a product of the joint imaginations of Frank and his father Angus? If the former is the case, then the Gothic aspect of *The Wasp Factory* provides a framework for its meaning. If there is evidence that Eric is substantial, this meaning may still remain but its significance is potentially diluted.

The difficulty the reader has in determining the truth lies in the unreliability of Frank Cauldhame as narrator. Almost from the opening lines, Frank demonstrates a vivid and unusual imagination which drives his behaviour. Furthermore, we are quickly advised that Frank has received the majority of his education at the hands of his father, an eccentric whom Frank believes to be unreliable in the information he has provided. This doubling serves to internalise the novel, and Frank's physical distancing from normal society emphasises this. Frank and his father live on an island, linked to a small Scottish town by a causeway. This separation is again doubled by Frank being obliged to pretend to be a visiting relative as his father never registered his birth. Legally and formally, Frank does not exist: 'My story was that I was the orphaned son of my father's long lost brother, and only staying on occasional extended holidays on the island' (p. 72).

The Wasp Factory is a Gothic novel: the island and the big old house are analogous to the Gothic castle, and both Frank and his father are grotesques, lonely people whose lives are steered by a single 'truth' which has become obsession. Frank is also a physical grotesque: a male castrated when he was three-years-old, as a result of an attack by the family dog Old Saul. It is as a consequence of this demasculinisation that Frank has developed his obsession with war games and means of destruction. His life has become a paranoid fantasy, with the totemic sacrificial poles designed as 'an early warning system and deterrent rolled into one' (p. 10) and the elaborate devices of Frank's oracle, the Wasp Factory itself, as a framework of what Banks himself calls 'incantatory ritual' (*Science Fiction Eye* 6, p. 26). Frank has killed three people, all whilst as a child, his younger brother and two cousins by a variety of cruel and usual means. All of his games, and thus most of his actions in the book – with the exception of brief encounters with his father and drunken evenings with his sole friend, the dwarf Jamie – are overtly militaristic, and he views this explicitly as a substitute for his perceived loss of sexuality: 'Both sexes can do one thing

specially well; women can give birth and men can kill... I consider myself an honorary man. We strike out, push through, thrust and take. The fact that it is only an analogue of all this sexual terminology I am incapable of does not discourage me' (p. 118).

If Frank is an unreliable narrator, what evidence do we have for Eric's existence within the narrative? The novel is punctuated by a series of telephone conversations between Frank and Eric. Each of these calls is initiated by Eric, but it is telling that on each occasion Angus does not hear the ring of the phone, and implies that he believes Frank to have been phoning out. The calls themselves are characterised by games, paradoxes and confusion of identity. On the first occasion Frank asks Eric where he is, the reply is:

"Here! Where are you?"

"Here."

"If we're both here, why are we bothering with the phone?" (p. 17)

Later Eric claims to be Frank in a particularly labyrinthine conversation and Frank is persuaded to call himself 'Eric' (p. 98).

One of the reasons for Eric's imprisonment was his habit of catching dogs from the town and setting fire to them. During his phone conversations with Frank he vehemently denies ever doing this, and becomes quite distraught and angry even at the mention of animals, whilst at the same time taunting Frank with the mention of eating hot dogs. It is, however, Frank who appears to have reason to hate dogs, though he claims that it is only Old Saul he despises: 'Old Saul was the culprit, Old Saul had gone down in history and my personal mythology as the Castrator' (p. 103). It is Frank who devises a flame-throwing device with which he devastates a colony of rabbits on the island (pp. 34-6), who incinerates his toy in a 'war' between the Aerosols and the Soldiers (p. 24), and who invents in the Wasp Factory a bizarre device in which a wasp is burnt alive. As Frank says when describing the town's reaction to Eric: '[A]s was probably inevitable a lot of kids started to think that I was Eric, or that I got up to the same tricks' (p. 52).

Frank's father, Angus, is a contributor to Frank's paranoia, and his obsession with games. For example, he has measured every item in the household and expects Frank to have memorised the figures (p. 11). He has apparently wilfully miseducated his child, telling him that 'Fellatio was a character in Hamlet' (p. 14) and other such tricks. In a further example of Gothic doubling, Angus too has his chemical experiments carried out in a locked laboratory. It is this unreliable figure who tells Frank that Eric has escaped, and it is stressed on several occasions that nobody else knows. Frank even tells Jamie that he is surprised that it hasn't been on the news (p. 74).

Frank's discovery of 'his' true nature comes when he finally achieves access to his father's study, where he discovers a supply of male hormones, tampons and Potassium Bromide. However, Frank immediately jumps to the conclusion that his father is really a woman. This displacement is in keeping with Frank's attribution of the burning dogs to Eric, and to other incidents. Although he is supposedly four years older, it is nine-year-old Eric who cries when the children's pet rabbits are burned with the first flame-throwers, but five-year-old Frank, who merely vows revenge on the perpetrator, and that for upsetting his brother rather than the death of his pets (p. 38). This leads to the first murder, that of Frank's cousin Blyth. The subsequent murders reveal that on each occasion Eric is absent. When Blyth is killed he is sleeping, leaving Frank to play on his own. Eric is assisting his father whilst Frank keeps their youngest brother Paul out of the way, and thus when Paul dies. Esmeralda's murder comes whilst Eric is on a school trip. Frank actually says: 'I had decided I would try to murder Esmeralda before she... arrived for their holiday. Eric was away on a school cruise, so there would only be me and her' (p. 88).

Frank also alleges that their father dressed Eric as a girl for the first three years of his life. Three was the age of Frances when attacked by Old Saul, and the point where 'she' becomes 'he' as Frank. Again Frank has displaced events onto another, possibly to avoid dealing with their consequences. Eric's break-down also comes during a separation from Frank, when he goes away to become a doctor like his father. Two aspects of this are significant. Firstly the horrific incident which provokes Eric's collapse involves a dying child with maggots in its skull (p. 142), which may be seen as a conflation of images which are all prevalent in Frank's imagination – he has a collection of skulls including those of the pet rabbits and Old Saul, he has killed three small children, and at one point views distant sheep: 'slow, like maggots, over the land, eating' (p. 150). Secondly, this incident and its subsequent consequences occur at the age when Frank would ordinarily be undergoing puberty, at the point when a tomboy would start to become a girl.

If Eric does not exist outside of Frank's imagination, then it is reasonable to consider that the murders are equally a product of his militaristic fantasies. Whether they happened or not is less important than the means of their alleged happening. The ingenuity with which Frank's imagination devises means of killing people is surely a symbol of the author's intent. Iain Banks has said in various interviews that *The Wasp Factory* is an attack on 'the British male military establishment' and Angus's manipulation of Frank's gender

perception is a clear representation of that. Eric's rôle is as fuel for Frank's paranoid fantasy, the encroaching menace from across the mainland, and though it isn't specified, from the east? Eric's reality and the reality of his actions give Frank genuine cause for some of his actions and thus dilute Banks's argument; but as a figment of Frank's warped mind, he becomes a potent symbol for what Banks considers to be the malaise in the military mind.

In the Gothic novel such symbolism is common, and there are further examples in *The Wasp Factory*; I have already mentioned that the entire novel is set on an island and features a large, old house. Banks explains this: 'Any time a

castle appears in any book [of mine] in a way it stands for the individual. Frank is almost literally cut off... literally insular in his perceptions' (*SF Eye* #6, p. 26). This makes it clear that what happens on the island, to a very great extent, correlates to what is happening in Frank's mind.

At the very end of the novel, however, Eric does almost make a physical appearance. Frank is out walking when he hears the sound of an animal in pain and then sees a dog on fire. He of course blames Eric, but this incident occurs just

I just liked it where Heller [in *Catch 22*] kept on bringing in the thing where whenever things were going too well they just added another mission increase and it suddenly had to be 55 missions rather than 50 before you got rotated. That was a sort of template for Eric's phone calls. Whenever I thought *The Wasp Factory* was flagging or showing slight signs of it I thought, "Right, time for another mad phone call from Eric."

Iain Banks interviewed by Andy Sawyer, Vector 158, December-January 1990-2, p. 7

minutes after Frank himself has been playing with a fire at the tip and expressing dissatisfaction with the modest results (p. 150). Is this latest dog-burning more displacement by Frank? When he returns to the house he makes his discovery about his father, but his challenge to Angus is interrupted by an apocalyptic scene in which a shed is set alight, apparently by Eric. There are explosions, but Frank puts the fire out, just like he'd earlier boasted doing with another fire on the island. Afterwards Eric is once again missing, but Frank persuades his father to tell him the truth. *The Wasp Factory* closes with Frank, now aware of 'his' feminine nature, looking down on Eric, as he lies sleeping peacefully. 'He feels no pain' (p. 182). Frank's demon, the artificial masculinity he has had forced upon him and which he himself has forced, is laid to rest and thus so is Eric.

It remains unclear whether Frank Cauldhame actually has a brother named Eric; although it seems not from the evidence of Frank's own narrative that the acts attributed to Eric were in fact carried out or imagined by Frank. As Frank says in the final scene:

'I was proud; a fierce and noble presence in my lands, a crippled warrior...
'Now I find I was the fool all along' (p. 183).

[Kev McVeigh is a former editor of Vector and is currently Awards Administrator. His interview with and article on Kim Stanley Robinson appeared in Vector 189. All quotes are from the 1985 Futura edition.—AMB/GDJ]

The View from the Bridge

An interview with Michael Marshall Smith by Paul Kincaid

Michael Marshall Smith, winner of the British Fantasy Award for his first short story, and author of two science fiction novels, *Only Forward* (1994) and *Spare* (1996), was the guest at the BSFA London Meeting in November 1996 and was interviewed by Paul Kincaid. We have edited the transcript. New readers may prefer to read Paul's review of *Spare* (page 19) before this interview.

PAUL KINCAID: I'll start by talking about how I met Michael Marshall Smith, which was at Eastercon last year. I'd been invited onto a panel based on the Radio 4 programme, *A Good Read*, in which each of the panelists chose a book and talked about it, and the others tore it apart. One of the books was *Only Forward* of which I had certain criticisms. As we were walking up onto the stage someone pointed out Michael Marshall Smith in the audience, but I went ahead and gave my criticisms, which no-one else agreed with...

MICHAEL MARSHALL SMITH: Particularly not me, it has to be said.

As we finished the panel, I was introduced to him – and he was nodding.

I walked into Eastercon not knowing this was going on, and suddenly, about ten minutes before it was due to start, someone said: they're discussing your book. Unfortunately, by that stage I'd been there about four or five hours and was perhaps excessively relaxed, and it was very easy to sit back and hear people trashing *Only Forward* and go: you're right, of course.

I said it was broken-backed, two books put together into one. Do you think it's one book?

I think it ended up being one book. The history of the writing of *Only Forward* made it two books in that I had a one-page idea and I found it went on and on and on. About a third of the way through a little light came on and I thought: ah, this is what it's actually about. So I steered it from what I'd happily been writing into what it turned out to be in the end. I think to that degree it is two books – but I hope that in the end it turned out to be a complete whole.

I tend to write in quite a linear way because writing can be quite hard and the thing which keeps it exciting for me is not knowing exactly what's going to happen. I was discovering the story of *Only Forward* as much as anyone else was. I like books like that, where you think you know what's going on and suddenly you think: ah, that's not what I was expecting. So I'm quite happy that it turned out that way.

Your new book, *Spare*, shares something of the characteristics of *Only Forward*, one of the curious things about it being that it's science fiction. Your short stories all seem to be horror, your novels seem to be science fiction. Why?

When I was a kid I read a certain amount of science fiction, Asimov, Arthur C. Clarke and in particular Ray Bradbury, then I stopped for a long time. Until *Only Forward* came out, in fact, and people said: you ought to read that William Gibson. You're a cyberpunk author, you are. I really don't know the answer.

What happened was, for six years I wrote short stories that were dark fantasy or horror or whatever you want to call it. I went on holiday, came back and said, right, you've done enough short stories, it's time to have a crack at doing a novel. So I sat down and started doing what I thought was going to be the first novel, and after about ten thousand words I thought it was just rubbish, no point in writing that. So I came back to this thing and after about a page I thought: this is set in the future, that's a bit unexpected. I carried on doing it and found myself quite happy to be doing stuff that's set in the future.

I don't know whether I actually consider my novels science fiction as such. One of the things our genre has to cope with is that people look down on things simply because they're set in the future or because they have some horror, say, and I happen to think there are a lot of people out there writing mainstream novels that happen to be set in the future.

There are an awful lot of things in *Spare* that I don't think a mainstream writer would do.

Absolutely. Which is a freedom our genre gives us that other writers don't have. They don't have the freedom to just make stuff up as we do, and surely part of the fun of writing should be just making stuff up.

One of the inspirations for it was I went on holiday to Virginia a few years ago, and I got a car and thought I'd have this lovely trip. I got off on the wrong exit, clearly, and drove into an area where at Stop signs people were trying the handles of the door. So I found the nearest Holiday Inn, moved in there and basically hid for the rest of the day. Next morning I thought I'd better see historical old Richmond, so I walked down to the desk and asked where's the nice bit. They said, oh, you want the historic Shocko and Bottom districts – which, if you ask me, are strange things to call districts in the first place. They directed me to them and advised me not to walk, despite the fact that it was, like, two hundred yards; so I set off at about half past nine, and I was back in the hotel by eleven o'clock. I'd done historic old Richmond. I was so bored that despite having sworn not to get in the car again I went a drove round in a spiral trying to find anything interesting, stopping off at all the malls along the way and finding they were just dangerous and a bit disappointing. So I drove away very grumpily the next day swearing that if I ever got the chance I would do something very horrible to Richmond, and on the very first page of *Spare* I raze it to the ground in a riot.

I suspect I'll never be given the keys to the city.

You've got this thing in the novel also called the Gap, which reminded me very much of the dreamscape in *Only Forward*. Do you like dreams?

I find dreams endlessly fascinating. People talk of what we're doing with Virtual Reality at the moment, but we all have

virtual reality when we go to sleep, every night, and it's very difficult to explain sometimes what it means. It's extremely real and it's like free entertainment. I'm quite lucky in that I get quite strange dreams and normally quite vivid dreams, and there are times when that world seems as real as this one. If one is looking for alternate reality, I don't think one has to look very far.

Your alternate reality is very bloody.

I have some bad dreams.

You do like to take us into another world, though, into a second world beside our own. This world doesn't seem to be enough.

It's like the question: are you religious? To which the answer is: no, in that I have no truck with organised religion. But on the other hand, I do have some sense of something, or maybe I just *want* to have some sense of something. We all want to believe there is something more, which is part of the reason we spend our time reading books, being taken into imaginary landscapes. It's not that this current one is insufficient, a lot of the time it is sufficient and we have to deal with what's in it, but sometimes you want to have that sidestep into something else.

One of the climactic scenes in *Spare* takes place in a chapel, but it's a pale imitation of the Gap, which is hard to describe but it's a sort of world in the interstices within our world.

It's almost like in our sleeping hours we have this sense there is somewhere else, there is some other thing that we're all a part of and that we understand. It's possibly part of the reason that we like fantastic literature, we have this in-built belief that there is some other reality. Then we wake up and we have to deal with everyday reality, which is very good at pushing imagination out of your life. I think one of the reasons I return time and time again to science fiction and horror and crime is just that it can take you slightly out of reality. That's why you can get into these books.

The Gap is clearly a replaying of the Vietnam War. Did it really impinge that much on your growing up?

Not really. There are obvious parallels, but it's supposed to stand for extreme experience of any kind. One of the things that most interests me is how experiences of a tiny, fragile nature or huge great unpleasant experiences can affect someone's life, how you can start of having a perfectly normal life and these things can buffet you from side to side like a pinball. Some of them will have, as far as you think, only a tiny effect, but as the years go by they snowball and you can end up with a character you don't recognise – the thing is how you deal with yourself after these things have happened to you.

The same thing happens in both of the novels, the characters are shaped by very bad experiences in the past. Doesn't anybody have nice experiences?

Nice things happen to the characters at different points in the novels, it's just the characters that have come to me so far are people who've had bad experiences of one type or another.

***Spare* is also a very good crime novel, very pacy, very thrilling in the way that a lot of crime novels seem to have stopped being these days. Do you read much crime?**

About a couple of years ago I discovered Jim Thompson. I'd

never read any crime before then, but in the way that I tend to when I discover new writers, I read all the way through him. Then I read James Lee Burke, then James Ellroy. (The reason I know I can't be a crime writer is that my name isn't James). Having read the three of them – particularly Jim Thompson, there's a quote from him at the beginning of this book – it made me think that within a crime structure you can do an amazing amount of things, in the same way that within a science fiction structure you can do an amazing amount. They don't have to be straight-down-the-line crime novels, you can bring in all sorts of things. I suppose I'm up for playing around: here's the basic structure, let's see how much we can do. And if people like it, great.

One of the things I'm coming to have to confront with both novels, but particularly *Spare*, is that pure science-fiction fans look at it and say we quite like it but there's stuff that isn't science fiction. Pure crime fans say: what's all this stuff about being set in the future? There tends to be a resistance to these elements of it.

There's a very strong moral line that runs through both of the novels. How intentional was that?

It's not intentional in the sense that I set out thinking: I really want to make a strong point about this. I tend to write in quite a personal way. And a lot of the writers I like most are voice writers, people like Martin and Kingsley Amis, Philip K. Dick, Stephen King, people you can read time and time again because it's not just the plot that you're reading. If it's someone whose sentences you treasure, whose voice seems to be speaking to you personally, then you will read them again and again. And I think along with trying to write as a voice writer comes a great deal of personal input. I assume there is something of me personally coming out, and I assume I have some sort of moral standpoint.

I can spot Philip K. Dick in those books. I can spot Stephen King. But Kingsley Amis?

I think the thing I got from Kingsley Amis is an understanding of the wide variety of things that can be funny. *Lucky Jim* is, to a large degree, about how, if you let yourself do it, the things that are really bloody irritating can be funny. You can get really irritated by it, or you can think this is so horrible that it's funny. It's being able to view the world through slightly ironic glasses that is the legacy from there.

There's a fair bit of nastiness in *Spare*. Are you a nasty person?

I'm a deeply nasty person.

It comes back to what I was saying about being interested in the extremity of experience. Any good book will have the minutiae of everyday life which is important to all of us and which we can all recognise. But it will also have extreme things.

To be honest, I have very little control over what goes into my books. It's what appears interesting to me. It's what I choose to do for a living, so it has to be interesting and exciting to me, which means it has to be a surprise.

So you don't know how it's going to end when you start?

I generally know what the beginning and end are, but there's this huge great grey cloud in the middle that has to be navigated through. That's the exciting bit.

What about the political aspect? I found *Only Forward* was making a deliberate political point. The nasty places were all fascist.

It's not something that I consciously put in. I think if you go in thinking I want to make this particular dialectical point, then people will think they're being sloganeered at. But any person who writes a work of fiction will have some views and they will percolate through the imagination they bring to bear on the book.

Let's talk about your stories for a while. You started out pretty much on a high, wasn't it your first story that won an award?

Yes. I'm a jammy bastard, we should all realise this. The first story I wrote was called 'The Man Who Drew Cats', which did win a British Fantasy Award.

And you've had other awards since then.

The amount it's costing me in bribes is actually breaking me.

Why did you start writing horror in the first place?

There's a very straightforward answer to that, which is Stephen King. When I was at college I did a lot of comedy, and I thought for a while that comedy was what I wanted to do. At the time I was reading a lot of Kingsley Amis and my best friend, Howard, and I had a drunken bet one night – I'd been banging on to him about Kingsley Amis and he'd been banging on to me about Stephen King. So I said, you read *Lucky Jim* and I'll read one of his books. I read *The Talisman*, and loved it. I was on tour at the time with The Footlights, and every town we came to I bought another Stephen King and read them and read them and read them. He was the first person who made me think I now want to write fiction for a living. So I started off with that genre.

I have to ask, did your friend like *Lucky Jim*?

He loved it, he's read several others. It was a tremendous evening, really.

So where did the comedy disappear to?

Oh, I see, you're going to start being nasty again.

The thing with comedy, I listened to a huge amount on the radio when I was a kid, the same as everyone else did: *The Burkiss Way* and the *Hitchhikers* stuff when it came out, *I'm Sorry I Haven't a Clue*, all that sort of stuff. So I went to college thinking what I wanted to do was comedy. I did that for three years and did a lot of performing at college, and after that we had a couple of radio series with Radio Four and tried to make the jump into television. This involved us making two pilots, one of which was very cheap and very crap, one of which was very expensive and reasonably good. An insight into BBC finances for you: this second pilot cost something like £200,000, it was directed by Geoff Posner and it was broadcast, it went out on television. I know because I saw it. And we never heard back, they never even rang to say yes or no. This is about three years ago, so as far as I know they could still be thinking: I'm looking forward to that new comedy series, I wonder why they haven't written it yet.

At the time I was writing comedy I would look around and anything could give me an idea for a sketch. Gradually that segued into things giving me an idea for a horror short story. When I knew that what I was writing was horrible was when I knew I'd better stop writing sketches, because people don't

want horrible sketches. It was a very natural progression.

But you don't write comedy stories.

I don't, but I think there is humour in them, for the most part.

Up until I wrote *Only Forward* I was in denial of the whole comedy thing in some ways, and a lot of the early short stories are really pretty miserable. One of the reasons I enjoyed writing *Only Forward* so much was that some little bit of my back brain was saying, hang on, you used to like doing comedy, so put some comedy in this.

It's black comedy.

It is black comedy, yes, but so much of life is black comedy. On any given day something will happen that at least will give you a rueful smile, if nothing else. I think any literature that does not include the black comedy or the good comedy of life is not reflecting the way life is.

Talking about performance raises another aspect of your career: this new production company.

A couple of years ago I started, for my sins, doing some screen writing. By an enormous stroke of luck I ended up of trying to convert Clive Barker's *Weaveworld* into an eight-part mini-series. This was a baptism of fire in many ways because it was eight hours, on the same thing – and to be honest round about the sixth episode you're thinking: it's just a bloody carpet, who cares?

But I've always been very interested in film and it's always been something I've wanted to get into. Around about the time I was doing that Steve Jones, the horror anthologist and film publicist and so on, and I had a very drunken conversation saying we should try and do something in film at some stage. Steve, who at that time was working as a consultant editor at Raven, edited a book by Jay Russell called *Celestial Days*. It's a detective story with LA references and supernatural Japanese demons – it's a fun novel. Steve said to me, this would make a good movie. So this year I wrote that as a film and there was a certain amount of interest immediately, which sort of kicked us into action.

Basically, the idea behind our company – which is, I'm afraid, called Smith and Jones – is that we would take partly my stuff and partly (because we have an enormous amount of contacts within the genre, particularly through Steve) we would have access to other 'intellectual property', if you like. It's a way of not letting a bunch of producers come over, buy stuff up for nothing, take the rights away and do what they like with it. Clive Barker, for instance, has no rights whatsoever on the *Hellraiser* characters. When a new *Hellraiser* film is made they don't even have to consult him. They do, because his name adds cachet to the films – but they don't have to. One of the things we're most keen on is keeping the rights with the author, it's an author-protective scheme in some ways. England has such a good background, particularly in horror, so we don't have to move over to LA to do this stuff, we can try and do it here. It's the same sort of genre material we like: we're doing some horror, some science fiction. Who knows what will happen. We've both got day jobs, if it doesn't come off, it's not a disaster.

Is this going to feature much of your work?

We're developing a couple of things which are mine at the moment, but we're also still pushing the *Celestial Dogs* script

around and to a degree we're up for anything. At the moment I'm screenwriting everything we're doing, but I've other stuff to do, it's not like I want to write everything. It's more like a central point for co-ordinating genre material and dealing with it seriously, and not being looked down upon because we're genre or because we're English.

You can't fail to notice that both of the novels are very visual. Is that the screen-writing experience coming through?

I don't know. When I wrote *Only Forward* I had no screenwriting experience apart from little doodlings that I'd done for myself. When I wrote *Spare* I'd just finished nine months doing *Weaveworld*. A lot of my references for science fiction and horror are film, I watch a lot of film. I think it's just one of those things that seeps in.

Any image that works for me works because I can visualise it in three dimensions and walk around it. I know that if I'm describing somewhere and I can't, in my inner eye, see it, walk around it, look up, look down, like a sort of *Doom* character, then it's not working.

And your next book?

It's going to be science fiction in the same way that *Spare* is. It's going to be a little bit closer to the present day, it's going to have the same elements of crime, horror, fantasy – but I don't know whether or not people who've read *Only Forward* and *Spare* consider them to be science fiction. I sort of do, but I don't know whether people in general will. It'll be a science fiction novel in that it will be set in the future, it will have stuff that cannot exist in the present and will have a science fiction sensibility.

I can't see any way of not seeing that as science fiction.

Which I have no problem with. It's a perpetual irritation to me that people seem to think that science fiction is the preserve of dweebs and social misfits. We know that's not the case. Novels like *Brave New World* and *1984*: these are set in the future but they are perfectly recognised classics of modern literature. So why can't other things set in the future be? I don't understand the problem that mainstream readers, and a lot of mainstream critics, have with the stuff that we do and the stuff that we like simply because it's not set now.

So what about science-fiction short stories?

I have done a couple. I've got one coming up in *Interzone* in a couple of months called 'Save As', which is my first ever *Interzone* sale, which I'm very happy about. And the one in *Dark Terrors 2*, which is actually a horror anthology, is set in the future and has a science fiction theme.

Horror tends to fringe into fantasy, science fiction tends to fringe into fantasy – do you ignore the fantasy?

It depends what you mean by fantasy. A lot of the early short stories have been pigeonholed as horror and have come out in horror anthologies, but to me horror means dismemberment in some way, it means nasty things happening to people, it means long dark staircases that you should not go up, it means not going outside when there is clearly something unpleasant outside.

Which sounds like a pretty good description of one of your novels.

But if you mean fantasy as high fantasy, people with swords and stuff, I'm not really invited to that party. I've read *Lord of the Rings* several times and enjoyed it immensely, but that's one particular sub-genre that I haven't entered into.

Though the second part of *Only Forward* is pretty much fantasy.

Dreamland in *Only Forward* and the Gap in *Spare* are fantasy, as I understand fantasy, which is leaving the real world behind according to the normal referents but bringing human characteristics and relationships into a completely different environment.

I think there can be – if you allow yourself to be sufficiently dreamlike, sufficiently surrealistic – a very fine distinction and possibly no distinction at all between science fiction and that kind of fantasy. Actually there's a kind of spectrum where science fiction can just shade into fantasy, and that can then shade into dark fantasy which is just one step away from horror. Part of the reason these novels have the shape they do is that if you plot a certain kind of course the distinctions between different genres are actually very very small. You can choose to write a science fiction novel which is all about parses and spaceships and really quite abstruse scientific concepts, or you can choose to write a different type, a Dick type, that will fade into fantasy, that will fade into dark fantasy, that will fade into horror, that will fade into crime.

Science fiction and horror seem to be part of the same genre, but they very rarely touch.

I think that's partly because the writers and the fans have very strict views on what they want to see. If you see stories that are a little bit edgy because they bring the two together, often the reaction will split along genre lines.

Part of the reason I write what I write is because I read a variety of things. I'm effectively writing, as I believe a lot of writers do, for myself: I like crime, I like horror, I like science fiction, I like mainstream. And I'm writing a book for someone like me.

While you're trying to pull the genres together, you're marketed as mainstream. How did you manage to pull that off?

It was a combination of things. One was pure chance: having Jane Johnson as my editor who is open to that sort of idea. The second was that *Only Forward* was so obviously a *melange* of genres that there was possibly a situation that if people put it in one area, they might be missing out in others. And there was a third: I went in there and said I consider this a mainstream book, please publish it as a mainstream book, and they said yes. To those who ask, sometimes it comes.

They've submitted *Spare* for the Clarke Award this year, they obviously consider it science fiction.

I didn't know that. But it is science fiction in every possible way. I just prefer to see science fiction as a flavour of mainstream rather than ghettoising it out into a completely different bookstore.

Michael Marshall Smith, thank you very much.

Living in his Own World: A Tim Burton Retrospective

by Dave M. Roberts

The release of Mars Attacks! (at present scheduled for February 28 1997) allows Dave M. Roberts the opportunity to review a career which has combined personal vision with the studio system

Tim Burton is an animator. He makes cartoons. I firmly believe this, in spite of the fact that he has, to the best of my knowledge, only made one animated film. This was his directorial debut, made whilst he was working for Disney. *Vincent* (1982) is about as un-Disney a cartoon as you are likely to find. It is a deeply expressionist visual poem, in black-and-white, telling the story of a young boy (Vincent), his obsession with Horror and his dream of becoming Vincent Price. This is not a passing phase, it is a total obsession, and young Vincent disappears into his dreams in a way which leaves you in no doubt that he is not about to come out of them. The poem is performed by Vincent Price, and even the moral at the end doesn't stick in the throat.

Burton was trained at The California Institute of the Arts, a school founded to train talented artists to become Disney animators. At Disney, he worked on films such as *The Fox and the Hound* (1981) and *The Black Cauldron* (1985), for which he was a scenic artist. He describes his own attempts at drawing Disney-style animals as looking more like road-kills. His position at the studio was modified, and he was given a job as a conceptual artist. This roughly translates as 'draw what comes into your head and we'll see if we can use any of it'. Disney couldn't.

After *Vincent*, Burton had made a twenty-five minute short live-action film. *Frankenweenie* (1982) is the happy tale of young Victor Frankenstein, a schoolboy whose dog gets killed in a road accident. As any self-respecting ten-year-old boy would, he rebuilds it and brings it back to life. Again, this is a film with a gothic feel, clearly harkening back to James Whales's *Frankenstein* in style.

Neither of Burton's films gained a theatrical release at the time (*Vincent* was used as a short with *Tim Burton's The Nightmare Before Christmas* [1993] and *Frankenweenie* was released on video in the US at the time of *Batman Returns* [1992]). Nevertheless, it was clear that the young film-maker was very talented, it was just that Disney was not in a position to harness his vision of the world. The two short films still made something of a name for themselves within the industry. At around the same time he also made two television shorts: *Hansel and Gretel* (1982) and *Faerie Tale Theater: Alladin and his Wonderful Lamp* (1984). It was only a matter of time before he was offered his first feature film.

Pee-Wee's Big Adventure (1985) is a strange film. Built around the astonishingly irritating Pee-Wee Herman, a character that is amusing for approximately seventeen seconds (a child in an adult's body, tight suit and fully equipped with squeaky voice). Pee-Wee has his dream bicycle stolen, and his hunt for it becomes a road movie set in a world with a surreal plastic-happy feel to it. This world does only seem to be within a small radius of wherever Pee-Wee happens to be. There are some gloriously dark touches, generally in dream sequences (although Large Marge, the dead trucker is a treat) but on the whole the dark vision of Tim Burton seems to be in direct conflict with the bright pseudo-childish world of Pee-Wee Herman. The result is a film packed with ideas, showing up the dark side of a faked 'happy world' that still manages to be largely unwatchable.

Beetlejuice (1988) is at heart a simple contemporary ghost story. A young couple are in the process of putting the finishing touches to their dream home when they are killed in a car accident. They are left to haunt their house forever. This fairly happy arrangement is spoilt by the arrival of the new owners, the worst type of 'hip' City people (the Deetz family) who redecorate the house in a most distressing way. Here we get a neat reversal of the exorcism of ghosts, with the ghosts trying to exorcise the living. To this end the eponymous Beetlejuice is hired, a dangerous and possibly insane bio-exorcist, against the warnings of the powers-that-be. But the powers-that-be in the afterlife are bureaucratic and unhelpful in the extreme, effectively leaving the couple with no choice. The Deetzes' daughter, Lydia, having a fascination for death and all things dark, is a link between the living and the dead. It is this link which provides the catalyst for the destructive forces that drive the film.

The conceit of a live-action cartoon is in full flow in this film. The whole film, particularly the special effects, were meticulously story-boarded before shooting began, and this design was stuck to closely. The actors frequently come across as just another element in the overall look of the film. In spite of this, and a number of mediocre special effects, the film is carried off with great energy and is hugely enjoyable. Although poorly received critically, *Beetlejuice* was very popular and made a lot of money for a relatively low-budget film.

After this, Burton was given a big budget film to direct. Despite the incredible hype which preceded and accompanied *Batman* (1989), it actually turned out to be one of the best comic adaptations made up to that date. With the help of Anton Furst's set design, Burton was able to create a magnificently dark and gothic Gotham City.

The plot, however, was annoying in that whilst it touched on the duality of the Batman / Bruce Wayne figure, and the nature of vigilantism as a crime-fighting measure, it failed to follow through. At what point does the vigilante cross the line of what is acceptable? The success of the film was in putting a comic strip on the big screen that had the look and feel of the best of the comic. It redefined *Batman* on film, as Frank Miller had done on paper (after the kitsch but fondly-remembered rubbish of the 1960s tv series) and the way that comic book heroes were portrayed in films.

Burton followed this line more successfully in 1992 with *Batman Returns*. In spite of the suicide of Furst, he still managed to recreate the noir feel of *Batman*. It also plunged headlong into the darker side of the Batman mythos; attempting to investigate the schizophrenic nature of Batman and Catwoman as well as the motivations of the Penguin. The bad guy was no longer a 'super-villain' (evil cackle), but a complex personality. This was described at the time (by Derek Malcolm) as a 'big-budget art movie'.

The film did do well at the box office, despite its darkness, but it didn't do as well as *Batman*. But then it had received nothing like the same level of hype. As a result, whilst Burton remained on the team of the third *Batman* film (*Batman Forever* [1995]) with an executive producer's credit,

it was directed by Joel Schumacher and was little more than an exciting action movie on a dark set. Burton still has an interest in the *Batman* franchise, and there is some talk of Burton directing *Catwoman*, a more direct sequel to *Batman Returns*.

Between the two *Batman* films, Burton made one of his more personal pet projects: a film based on a sketch made some years earlier of a man with scissors for hands. *Edward Scissorhands* (1990) was the first of Burton's projects since *Frankenweenie* where he had any significant hand in the script. It was adapted by Caroline Thompson from a story the two had co-written.

The film is the story of a (teenage) boy who isn't quite finished. An inventor (Vincent Price) was building a young man, but died shortly before completing him. Hence the hands, or rather the lack of them. Edward is discovered frightened and alone living in the gothic castle overlooking the town by the most unsuccessful of Avon Ladies. She takes him in and attempts to care for him. At first the townsfolk are intrigued and very friendly. As his popularity grows, his naivety comes more into play and he is taken advantage of. Then people turn against him, except for Kim – who initially found him repellent, but grew to love him. After accidentally hurting Kim, Edward is chased out of town by an angry mob. In a final confrontation with Kim's boyfriend, Edward kills him and returns in secret to the castle. The mob is told that both are dead.

The story is presented as a fairy tale told by old lady (implicitly Kim) to her granddaughter. The fairy-tale presentation is correct; the highly stylised pastel (and pastoral) small town and gothic castle tell us that this is what we are watching. The story is also of incompatible worlds or, more accurately, the stranger from another world finding that, after an initial fascination, our world cannot cope with something which is so different. I find this a very beautiful and moving film. It manages to convey something of the horror of 'being different' that is on a par with Kafka's 'Metamorphosis'.

After *Batman Returns*, Burton had two major projects on the go, both of which could be seen as something of a change of direction, but both of which also fit very nicely into his overall body of work. First is a film which he didn't direct: *Tim Burton's The Nightmare Before Christmas* (Director: Henry Selick). But Burton's input went far beyond writing the story and producing the film; the final look and design are derived from his work.

Jack Skellington, the king of Hallowe'en Town, is becoming tired of doing the same thing year after year. After accidentally stumbling across Christmas Town, he becomes fixated with the idea of doing Christmas instead. He has Sandy Claws kidnapped and sets about the job. His good ideas are subverted by his own nature, and more importantly the nature of those he is trying to get to do most of the work (the inhabitants of Hallowe'en Town). The whole season is an unmitigated disaster until Jack finally admits defeat, gets Sandy Claws released and the job of Christmas can be done properly after all.

Once again, the central character tries to move from one world to another. In contrast to *Edward Scissorhands*, it is a conscious attempt to be something different. The theme seems to be about retaining the true nature of people. *Edward Scissorhands* is about the effects of trying to alter someone else, where as *Nightmare* is about doing it to yourself.

Nightmare is the third of Burton's films to portray Christmas celebrations going wrong. In *Batman Returns* the action centres around a major Christmas celebration, and, in

Edward Scissorhands it is during preparations for Christmas that Edward is driven out of town. *Batman* also centres around a major celebration for the city of Gotham. It may be that at times of mass celebration, people are pushed hardest to conform to what is expected and alter their personality accordingly.

The conflicts between differing realities often comes through as the driving force of the film; in *The Nightmare Before Christmas* the ideals of Christmas are imposed on Hallowe'en, in *Edward Scissorhands* and *Vincent* the two worlds exist but come into conflict only with a person from one trying either to fit in with another or to reconcile the two. Within the context of the *Batman* films, the differing realities are personalised to an even greater degree; one world is inhabited in two distinctively different ways by the same person. Schizophrenia is there in all of the films, it just gets de-personalised in some of them.

Ed Wood (1994) is homage to Edward D. Wood Jr., best known as the director of 'the worst film of all time', *Plan 9 from Outer Space* (1958). Made in black-and-white, it has the look, if not the feel, of a fifties B-movie. (Another long-cherished project, based on Valerie Martin's novel *Mary Reilly*, was abandoned in a bluff calling exercise with studio over this. The story of Jekyll and Hyde, retold from the point of view of a maid, was eventually [and disastrously] filmed by Stephen Frears with John Malkovich and Julia Roberts in the leads). It does not present Wood as a figure of fun. That would be too simple. Wood surrounded himself with a bizarre cast and crew, was a transvestite who frequently turned up in angora sweater, tights and heels, and spent the last years of his life in an alcoholic despair. Instead the film presents Wood living in his own world where he is a great director making great movies. The humour of the film comes mainly from the disparity of between reality and Wood's viewpoint. What comes across is that Wood was a great director. His films are indescribably awful, that is not in doubt. He couldn't write, he couldn't direct, his cast couldn't act (even Bela Lugosi was long past his best at this stage). His enthusiasm and drive meant that he got them made in the most trying of circumstances. The films are crap, but he got them made, that's why he's great. Burton succeeds in displaying a great affection (and sympathy) for his subject.

What makes a Tim Burton film *A Tim Burton Film* has to be the look of the piece. This is not to say that they all look the same, because they don't. Each film creates a vastly different world from the one which we know, but has its own internal consistency. In the case of *Pee-wee's Big Adventure*, the created world just seems to be dropped onto ours, and it grates a little. Within *Beetlejuice*, where one is presented as being imposed on, and at odds with, another, it is very effective.

Another element has to be the music of Danny Elfman. All of Burton's feature films (with the exception of *Ed Wood*) have scores by Elfman. There appears to be a complete understanding between director and composer as to what is required for any given scene. Following a 'vacation from each other' with *Ed Wood*, *Mars Attacks!* (1996) saw the two working together again.

Mars Attacks!, released in the UK on February 28, is another film inspired by visual imagery, in this case an appalling set of trading cards of the same name which date back to the early 1960s. They feature huge swollen-headed Martians doing horrible things to our women, our army and the occasional cat. This might lead us to another 'gung-ho fighting the nasty alien invaders' type big budget movie. But at least this one is definitely intended to be funny.



Cognitive Mapping 5: Magic Realism

by Paul Kincaid

The term 'Magic Realism' was coined in 1924 by the critic Franz Roh to describe German paintings of the post-First World War school known as *Neue Sachlichkeit* or New Objectivity. It wasn't until the late 1940s that the term was appropriated by Alejo Carpentier to apply to the literature that was starting to come out of Latin America. Even then the term was ill-defined, and by the 1970s, when Jorge Luis Borges was being acclaimed as the founding father of Magic Realism, it was clear that the term was simply being applied to any Latin American writer whose work was not strictly realistic.

In fact, Borges is about as far from Magic Realism as it is possible to get. His brief *ficciones* disguised as essays were elaborate literary games played with our usual notions of time and identity and reality; his work revolved endlessly around notions of otherness, and there were always parallel worlds glimpsed through cracked mirrors. Magic Realism also involves other worlds, but they are worlds co-eval with our own, worlds glimpsed through a magnifying glass which elaborates details normally missed. Like Liberation Theology, the branch of Catholicism that has thrived in Central America by blending aspects of local belief and inspiration with European religious teachings, Magic Realism is a blend of European literature and indigenous folktales and traditions. The strangeness, the supernatural element within their world, is a natural part of it and treated just as realistically – though it must be remembered that even the real is treated in a heightened, enriched prose, as if that, too, belongs to a world of magic and mystery.

With that in mind, it is clear that rather than Borges, whose analytical fictions owe more to Stevenson, Kipling and Wells than to anything indigenously magical, the true precursors of Magic Realism are writers like Carpentier, Adolfo Bioy Casares, Carlos Fuentes and Julio Cortázar. But it was with Gabriel García Márquez, and particularly with the publication of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* that Magic Realism achieved its identifiable form. The story of the remote village of Macondo, and of the Buendía family, is the exemplar for everything that has been classified as Magic Realism ever since. The extract quoted, for instance, could as easily be from a mainstream, realist work: it tells of an expedition from Macondo that gets lost in the swamps and jungles that separate the village from the coast, and how they discover a old galleon that has somehow been enclosed within the jungle. But it is told in a rich style – the galleon is 'white and powdery in the silent morning light' – that heightens the mood so that it is made to seem less rather than more realistic. And when extraordinary details are added – the interior being 'a thick forest of flowers', for instance – the sense of magic tipping the balance away from realism is complete.

Magic Realism has continued to be a significantly Latin American form of fantasy, notably in the novels of Isabel Allende whose first novel, *The House of the Spirits* (1982), used ghosts and other supernatural incursions to tell a moving and disturbing family saga that acted as an oblique commentary on the overthrow of her uncle, Salvador Allende's, Marxist government of Chile. However, the appearance of *One Hundred*

Years of Solitude also turned Magic Realism into a world literature, and writers as varied as Peter Carey (*Illywhacker*, [1985]) and Angela Carter (*Nights at the Circus*, [1984]) have used the freedom to move between realism and fantasy to great effect.

The influence and effects of Magic Realism are, inevitably, seen most clearly in the literary fantastic, but its influence reaches into science fiction through those writers who can be seen to occupy that curious hinterland between the genres. M. John Harrison, for instance, in *The Course of the Heart* (1992) uses a studiously realistic voice reminiscent of his mainstream novel *Climbers* (1989) while allowing the fantastic to intrude as if it had been among his other factual observations. John M. Ford uses the richness of exaggerated observation, of over-emphasised detail, in stories such as 'Chain Home, Low' (1996), whose variation on a theme by Neil Gaiman indicates how much an awareness of Magic Realism went into the complex literary mix that

was *The Sandman* (1988-96). Magic Realism seems as close to a description of John Crowley's indefinable *Aegypt* (1987) and *Love and Sleep* (1994), which brings the theories of myth and fantasy of Joseph Campbell, Mircea Eliade, Robert Graves and others into play in closely observed and richly detailed sequence in which it is impossible to tell where reality ends and fantasy begins.

However, the writer who has most vividly and most effectively married Magic Realism and science fiction is Lucius Shepard. The passage quoted, which tells of a horrific but magical killing by a swarm of butterflies, could almost have come from the work of Márquez or Allende with its dense descriptive richness, its sense of a reality that could be our reality if only we could see it in sufficient detail. Yet this lush jungle of prose also contains within it the mechanistic prose of a hi-tech war, of helicopter pilots rendered inhuman by the head-up displays on the opaque visors of their helmets, of soldiers dehumanised by drugs.

Life During Wartime is a shrewd conflation of cyberpunk and Magic Realism, the two modes representing the two sides in the war in Central America that acts as an analogue for the Vietnam War. The forces of the United States, with their designer drugs and military toys are science fictional, glittering and impersonal, but the more the hero, David Mingolla, finds himself caught up with the other side, and particularly the more he finds himself unravelling the endless war between two families which starts in a novel but which eventually comes to be the underlying truth about the war, then the more the tone of the novel becomes Magic Realism. Just as Márquez reveals the truth the more he allows emotions, dreams and irrationality to enfold and enrich his portrait of family and village life, so Shepard reveals that the truth is more readily understood the more it moves away from a strict, rational recital of the facts.

Magic Realism and science fiction are complementary strands of the fantastic which find patterns and meanings outside any strictly factual portrayal of the world.

When they woke up, with the sun already high in the sky, they were speechless with fascination. Before them, surrounded by ferns and palm trees, white and powdery in the silent morning light, was an enormous Spanish galleon. Tilted slightly to the starboard, it had hanging from its intact masts the dirty rags of its sails in the midst of its rigging, which was adorned with orchids. The hull, covered with an armour of petrified barnacles and soft moss, was firmly fastened into a surface of stones. The whole structure seemed to occupy its own space, one of solitude and oblivion, protected from the vicies of time and the habits of the birds. Inside, where the expeditionaries explored with careful intent, there was nothing but a thick forest of flowers.

One Hundred Years of Solitude (Cien Años de Soledad, [1967]) Gabriel García Márquez

He came around to cap-pistol noises, to a sky that was a hallucinatory blur of colour. Reds, blues, yellows. He couldn't figure it out. Something odd lurched past, turning, staggering. Mingolla sat up, watched the thing reeling through the clearing. Matted with delicate wings, man shaped, yet too thick and bulky to be a man. It screamed, tearing at the clogged viscera tripling the size of its head, pulling off wads of butterflies, and then the scream was sheared away as if the hole had been plugged. Butterflies poured down in a funnel to thicken it further, and it slumped, mounded, its surface in constant motion, making it appear to be breathing shallowly. It continued to build, accumulating more and more butterflies, the sky emptying and the mound growing with the disconnected swiftness of time-lapse photography, until it had become a multicoloured pyramid towering thirty feet above, like a temple buried beneath a million lovely flowers.

Life During Wartime (1987) Lucius Shepard

Bookspotting

An Occasional Series Highlighting Neglected Books – Both Old And New

Northern Lights by Philip Pullman (Point Scholastic Children's Books, 1995, titled as *The Golden Compass* in the USA)
by Justina Robson

This book won the 1996 Carnegie Medal, the children's book equivalent of the Booker Prize, and once you start reading it isn't hard to see why. Set in a fictional Oxford (in the country of Brytain) the story reveals itself and the world of its setting with an enthralling ease which many 'adult-book' novelists would do well to study. In his acceptance speech of this award Pullman spoke out freely about the importance of storytelling. 'In adult literary fiction, stories are there on sufferance. Other things are felt to be more important: technique, style, literary knowingness. Adult writers who do deal in straightforward stories find themselves sidelined into a genre such as crime or science fiction, where no-one expects literary craftsmanship [...] In a book for children you can't put the plot on hold while you posture artistically for the amusement of your sophisticated readers...' And he should know. This is one of the best examples of a well-told story I have ever come across.

It starts with simple beginnings as a girl, alone of her sex in the all-male Jordan College, sets out to spy on the secret rituals of the Master and his scholars. A tomboy and a savage, Lyra is a dynamic heroine. Together she and her daemon familiar, Pantalaimon, become entangled in a complex net of action and intrigue which takes the reader through a fascinating alternate Oxford and into the heart of the Northern ice, where Lapland is ruled by a fierce race of armoured polar bears and beautiful witches fly bare-armed in the freezing air. The imagination that has gone into this is simply stunning, the Fantasy equivalent of eating a refresher after days of sickly white chocolate (scuse me chocoholics, it's just a metaphor). It's the kind of book that makes you think, well, why don't more people make worlds like this? – and then cast a weary eye at Robert Jordan and realise that they probably would if they could, poor things. Not only the imagination, but every detail of this book is beautifully rendered, quickly giving a very vivid internal background through which the characters forge their way with great energy as they go about that typical children's book plot – exploring the nature of the soul.

Reminiscent of Mervyn Peake in the outset, with the many-roofed Jordan College being Lyra's playground, *Northern Lights* quickly proves that it will develop into something less stolid but equally magnificent. Pullman dishes out his nuances of character sparingly but his timing is impeccable – the overall effect is slow and satisfying as the whole picture develops in complexity. In particular I found the characters of Lord Asriel and the mysterious Mrs Coulter truly shocking when fully revealed and I thought I had seen and heard enough to make me a fairly unshockable cynic in these matters.

At times the book contains oblique implications about the characters that I doubt anyone under 13 is likely to pick up on and these are particularly interesting for adult readers – there's a lot of passion in this book and Pullman never makes the mistake of playing down to his audience when writing about the sexual charisma of some of the protagonists. This makes the 'reality feel' of the whole book that much stronger and there is a constant sense that you are being let in on secrets and wonders that are really for people more 'adult' than you which must be

particularly satisfying for younger readers and will no doubt bring many a smile of recognition from older ones.

Unlike a lot of the more popular writers in the Fantasy genre Pullman doesn't flinch from life's most difficult lessons by clothing them in 'acceptable' sentimentality and he doesn't patronise his readers no matter how complicated or unpleasant it gets. Nor does he set up expectations only to worm out of their implications later. When it is revealed early on by the Alethiometer, a device like a compass for telling the truth of matters, that Lyra will be involved in a terrible betrayal and will, unknowingly, be the betrayer, the fulfilment of that promise is paid out in full. This storyline is particularly well built. Even close to the moment itself and knowing that prophecy all along you don't realise until very late just who is going to be the one she abandons and in what terrible circumstances. It's rare nowadays that a book can make me cry and feel the same sense of injustice and fury as I did when a child but this one did. As a writer I think I actually learnt something from it too (shock horror) – yes, you can do it *all* with the story and be a good writer too (characters and everything!).

Another treat is that Pullman captures absolutely the gulf of understanding between adults and children but lets you in on both worlds. His adults all seem dark and inscrutable, full of incomprehensible motives and cruel ways when seen from Lyra's point of view, yet in their own scenes their reasons for acting as they do have a certain familiarity to an older reader. If nothing else it is a clear example of how we can learn to rationalise cruelty and selfishness.

Northern Lights is the first in a trilogy *His Dark Materials*. The plot which will carry the series centres on the science of experimental theology. Mrs Coulter and her golden monkey are conducting cruel experiments on stolen children to find the nature of the soul and its interaction with Dust, a phenomenon associated with the Northern Lights, which has revealed an ethereal city hanging in the moving patterns of solar particles. She believes it is possible to travel to this place and it is determined to be the first to cross over ... but will Lyra beat her to it? (Clue: book two is set in our Oxford so somebody must make it).

All in all *Northern Lights* is a dark book but also, in the best tradition of dark books, thrilling. It has a lasting flavour of savagery to it which is exciting, almost exultant. Even the friendly and heroic character of the bear Lorek Byrison, has its violent side and few people are to be trusted. The plot winds like a snake. There are no easy answers to the problems the characters encounter. Fortunately Lyra is resourceful and strong. There are two more books to come in the full set of *His Dark Materials*, so it's just as well. If they live up to the promise of the first they will be worth the wait and I'm with the author, Philip Pullman, when he says, '[Children] are ignorant little savages, most of them. But they know what they need and they go for it with the intensity of passion, and what they need is stories [...] We don't need lists of rights and wrongs, tables of dos and don'ts: we need books, time and silence.'

No matter how old a savage you are, if you don't set aside some time for this one I have to tell you that your life just got that bit poorer.



First Impressions

Reviews of Hardback and Paperback Originals

Edited by Paul Kincaid

Peter Ackroyd

Milton in America Sinclair-Stevenson, 1996, 277pp, £15.99

Reviewed by Paul Kincaid

Ever since *Hawksmoor* played tricks across time, Peter Ackroyd's novels have regularly brushed with the fantastic. This new novel does so overtly by presenting an alternate history scenario, though at first it seems that this change in the time stream could have little effect upon our world. John Milton served in Oliver Cromwell's government and might indeed have considered his life in danger when Charles II was restored to the throne. In actuality, Milton was honoured during his lifetime and went on to write his greatest works, most notably *Paradise Lost*. In this world he flees across the Atlantic to a Puritan settlement in New England – and the epic verse is therefore never written.

But as the story slowly unravels, it becomes obvious that Milton has, by his actions, translated *Paradise Lost* from the page to the political stage. Fervent in his beliefs, skilled at using words to bend others to his will, Milton quickly establishes himself as the political leader of the settlement which takes his name: New Milton. At first his dictatorship is benevolent, doing no more than hold the settlers to the puritan beliefs they all profess. Milton plays music and sings, he is relaxed in response to the teasing of his young companion and 'seeing eye', Goosequill. Goosequill, who narrates a large portion of the novel, has no time for puritanism, liking 'strong water' and bright colours and women – especially Kate, the sister of one of the settlement's original leaders – nevertheless he is content to stay, admiring his master.

Then blind Milton wanders lost into the forest, falls into an Indian hunting trap, and miraculously recovers his sight. The New World, this untouched commonwealth for which Milton has such high expectations, has already got an air of the fantastic, its primeval innocence reflected in the way that native creatures such as the beaver and the turkey are described like mythic beasts and Indian cures are shown to work as if by magic. So the restoration of Milton's sight is just the most dramatic exemplar of the unspoilt perfection offered by the New World. Living with the Indians for a few weeks, Milton is able to see all that this Paradise could be. It is a glorious world that he loves, but its acceptance would mean the abandonment of all the principles for which he

fled the Old World, the strictures which have made him the ruler and shaper of a world according to his vision. When he returns to his community once more he is not only blind once more, but his fanaticism is more pronounced than ever.

Now a Catholic community is established nearby. A community which is presented as being open, lively, colourful, free, a way of life for which Goosequill yearns yet which is anathema to everything Milton stands for. To the Puritans the Catholics represent the very devil, their beliefs, their practices, their involvement of the Indians in their community life, their inter-racial marriages all threaten the roots of the puritan commonwealth. Milton exaggerates these deep divisions, until he whips the whole of Puritan New England into a war fever. And the Paradise of the New World is lost by the introduction of war.

As ever, Peter Ackroyd has a flair for the sharp and accurate pastiche, but the language can too easily obscure the story. Here, for instance, he has written a telling fable, but it is lost within the language and the genuine strength of the story is dissipated by the cleverness of the telling.

James Bibby

Ronan's Rescue

Orion, 1996, 261pp, £15.99

Andrew Harman

The Deity Dozen

Legend, 1996, 326pp, £16.99

Reviewed by Jon Wallace

We have here two more entries in the funny fantasy stakes. Andrew Harman's *The Deity Dozen* looks closest to the Holy Grail of Pratchett appeal, the dust jacket has a 'humorous' look in the yellow/red colour combination that has proved so attractive to funny fantasy fans. On the other hand, how Bibby's publishers hope to call out to any passer-by with a girl on the front (not even a babe!), I don't know. Maybe they plan to rely on quality, and the popularity of the previous volume, *Ronan the Barbarian*. Actually, all these books have in common is that they fall into the same general category in the bookshop.

Ronan's Rescue is an action adventure which picks up Ronan's story after his abduction by the dreaded Shikara, 'a sorceress of ill-repute and terrifying lusts', it is up to his friends and girl-friend to free him. The storyline fairly whips along, and some of the comic invention is priceless, the lapsed-yuppy culture of the Vagen raiders springs to mind. But where this book falls down is in its main source of laughs, the puns. I like a good pun as much as the next person, but enough is enough. Once it clicked that just about everything had another meaning it became intrusive. Everytime I was introduced to a new character or place everything stopped until I'd either worked out the joke, or I skipped forward to the punchline. This doesn't help the smooth narrative flow.

Andrew Harman takes a different tack in *The Deity Dozen*: his storyline and humour rely on the absurdity of the situations that he creates for his characters. Mortropolis, the realm of the dead, has a new Undertaker-in-Chief who wants to streamline the operation. It also has its rebels, demons who are unhappy with the status quo... a hot-bed of revolution, really. All in all, a tale of intrigue and politics. The snag with relying on the humour inherent in a situation is that it is harder to pull off, a bit riskier, you can miss the mark completely...

But the jokes aren't the only thing important about a book, you need a story too. Once you put the puns behind you, *Ronan's Rescue* has a decent plot, the various threads weave together until the strands converge, the big fight takes place and the bad guys get... well. *The Deity Dozen* works differently: there are no heroes in this novel. From Flagit and Nabob down below to the Supreme Being in charge of Savoury Supplies in Heaven above everyone is self-serving and generally nasty. This makes it harder to care about either the demons or the deities that they have god-napped.

These books can be compared on two levels. As action fantasies, *The Deity Dozen* has a plotline that is muddled and its goal is unclear while *Ronan's Rescue* is better, the different strands twisting together and reaching a satisfying conclusion. As humour it is the other way round: *Ronan's Rescue* relies heavily on the pun or the abrasiveness of the characters and suffers as a result, on the other hand *The Deity Dozen* does use the pun but doesn't go over the top and the rest of the humour is firmly based in the situations that the characters find themselves embroiled in.

Sarah Ash

Songspinnners

Orion, 1996, 325pp, £16.99

Mary Corran

Darkfell

Orion, 1996, 326pp, £16.99

Reviewed by Lynne Bispham

Darkfell is described as a return to the world of Mary Corran's *Imperial Light*, although it is a self-contained story. Five young people go on a pilgrimage to the Barren Lands where, 60 years before, the Lords of Light appeared to Quorden, founder of their Order. Ninian, heir to the

lakeside estate of Arkady, her friend Quest, cousin Ran and Ran's brother, Affer, are all *akhal*, dwellers in the wetlands who are able to swim and dive further than 'normal' humans. The fifth, Kerron, is a Thelian, one of the city people who was found abandoned as a baby and brought up amongst the *akhal* at Arkady. Ninian is hopelessly in love with Quest, who has decided to become a celibate priest of the Order of the Lords of Light, so when they are left alone she seduces him and conceives a child, Sarai.

The action jumps ten years. Quest has been away training for the priesthood in the city of Enapolis, now he has returned and the upbringing of Sarai becomes a cause of

contention between him and Ninian, particularly as the tenets of the Order are opposed to the customs of the *akhal*. All the pilgrims have been changed in some way by the Barren Lands. After, the worst affected, can now hear other people's thoughts and cannot cope with this unwanted knowledge. Kerron, who has always felt himself an outsider at Arkady, hears a voice in his head telling him to destroy the *akhal* and bring back the 'darkness'. He is also a priest but has none of Quest's sincere faith: he has realised that the Order's main purpose is political and social rather than religious. When Arkady is threatened by plague, Kerron, under the influence of the malign voice in his head, obstructs any attempt to prevent disaster. As the *akhal* begin to die, Quest realises that his faith has been misplaced.

While Arkady and its environs are well-drawn and the tensions between the various characters are vividly depicted, this novel never really adds up to the sum of its parts. The characters never reach any conclusions about the power that resides in the Barren Lands, and their salvation comes, unsatisfactorily, as a *deus ex machina*. Possibly the book is not as self-contained as it appears and would benefit if read alongside *Imperial Light*, but it does suffer by comparison with Sarah Ash's *Songspinnners* which also depicts a repressive religion, but one that has been corrupted rather than shown to be false, and this presents its adherents with more subtle difficulties, both psychological and tangible.

Rebecca Bradley

Lady in Gil

Gollancz, 1996, 288pp, £16.99

Reviewed by Barbara Davies

Rebecca Bradley is Canadian and presumably unrelated to that other Bradley (Marion Zimmer) more often associated with fantasy. If *Lady in Gil* is, as I suspect, her debut, it is amazingly assured.

One thousand years before the story begins, the mysterious Oballef used a magical figurine (The Lady) to transform the island of Gil into a paradise. Oballef's descendants ruled Gil happily for centuries, but a little over 70 years ago the warlike Sherank invaded. Just when it was most needed, The Lady was lost and the victorious Sherank turned Gil into a smouldering heap of rubble. The Gilmen who could fled, vowing to return one day; those who remained were enslaved.

The priority of the exiles was to find The Lady and use its power to evict the Sherank and restore Gil to its former glory. However, only Oballef's descendants could wield the figurine safely, invoking 'the Lesser and Greater Wills', so a plan was evolved: the Priests would teach the latest scion of Oballef who had reached maturity 'The Heroic Code' and other lore, then send him/her back to Gil on a quest to find The Lady. Unfortunately, the plan failed at this point because the scions were never heard from again.

Tigrallef (Tig) is a scion of Oballef. Fortunately he has an older brother, so while Arko is being trained to undertake the quest, the studious Tig can bury his head contentedly in the archives. But Arko has a serious accident before he can set out and it is decided that Tig must go

Orial lives in the spa town of Sulien and her physician father, Jerame Magellonne, has always prevented her from having any contact with music. Unknown to Orial, she is descended from the Lifhendil, an extinct race with extraordinary musical ability but who were also susceptible to a form of madness caused by the music itself. This, Jerame believes, led Orial's mother, also Lifhendil, to drown herself; but Orial, unaware of this, has secretly taught herself music from her mother's books.

Amaru Khassian, a celebrated musician and composer, is persecuted in his own country by the Commanderie, religious fanatics inimical to artistic freedom. Fleeing across the border, Khassian comes to Jerame's sanatorium seeking treatment for his hands which were burned when the Commanderie torched the opera house where his latest work was to be performed. He discovers that Orial can 'hear' his music in her mind and makes her his amanuensis, since he can't even hold a pen let alone write down a musical score. Meanwhile, agents of the Commanderie who see Khassian as a focus for rebellion are moving against him.

Darkfell is a competent fantasy, but what makes *Songspinnners* the more satisfying novel is the more complex depiction of character and the ability of the author to resolve all the various strands of the plot – archaeological excavations reveal how Orial can escape her mother's fate – without the conclusion of the novel appearing contrived.

instead.

Arko was great hero material, but Tig considers himself a coward – his mother is the only person who believes he can find The Lady, but don't all mothers have a touching faith in their sons? What Tig doesn't know, however, is that his 'cowardice' will work to his advantage: previous failures were caused primarily by the outdated notion of heroism they had been taught. Moreover, Tig's hours of studying have given him esoteric knowledge about Gil and its environs which will prove invaluable. Once in Gil he discovers a Gillish underground called The Web and meets the independent-minded and beautiful Calla. With their help, Tig sets out to find The Lady and, of course, after many risky adventures, he succeeds.

Quest plots are as much about the search for wisdom as the quest itself, and that is certainly true of *Lady in Gil*. Young Tig finds love, sex and betrayal in unexpected places, and experiences every emotion from terror to joy. He also learns that the best intentioned acts can have tragic consequences and that magic talismans are only as good as their wielder. He is certainly older and wiser by the time the story ends – and so is the reader.

Rebecca Bradley is a born storyteller who deftly advances the plot and sketches in her characters with lucid prose. We know immediately that Tig is studious, for example, because his first action is: 'I marked my place with my finger and looked up.' Tig, Calla and Lord Shree (one of the Sherank) are complex characters whose shifting emotions and loyalties keep the reader's sympathy engaged while advancing the plot in unexpected ways. And what a plot! It grips from the first sentence and continues at

breakneck speed.

Unusually for fantasy, perhaps, what begins as an out-and-out romp gradually darkens in tone and ends in partial tragedy. It seems that Bradley is too much the realist to allow a 'happy ever after' conclusion, both in personal and political terms. There are clear parallels between the demise

of the Sherank and the breakup of the USSR in Tig's realisation that the absence of a major aggressor doesn't necessarily mean a world full of sweetness and light.

Lady in Gil is first rate fantasy which doesn't require you to leave your brain at home. Read and enjoy, and perhaps weep a little.

Steve Erickson

Amnesiascope

Henry Holt, 1996, 225pp, \$23.00

Reviewed by Paul Kincaid

Typically, Steve Erickson's novels deal with characters awaking from the American Dream, and finding a people so ununited that their world is, literally, disrupted. In *Amnesiascope*, for instance, Los Angeles is now isolated from the rest of America, ringed by fires and broken into a series of distinct time zones so that one street may be separated from its neighbour by a matter of minutes. Thus, symbolically, we are told that nothing unifies America, that its people can never cohere, that Erickson's central character must discover his own morality in a land where every man is an island.

Erickson's recent books have had a strange degree of overlap. *Arc d'X* was a fiction whose starting point was contained in his 'non-fiction' *Leap Year*, and in *Amnesiascope* the narrator is 'Steve Erickson' though it is not altogether clear if this is the same 'Steve Erickson' who was an American novelist murdered in Berlin towards the end of *Arc d'X*. Even more difficult to work out is how much this 'Steve Erickson' overlaps with the Steve Erickson who wrote the book, for here, as if he is closing a circle, Erickson contains echoes of all his previous books. But echoes that twist and distort every notion we carried with us out of those works.

Erickson's LA is a landscape of the imagination, a wilderness as torn and decayed as the sand-swept streets of *Days Between Stations* or the musical underground rivers of *Rubicon Beach*. Here, as well as the fragmentation of time, there are streets that disappear or lead to places they are not supposed to go. Maps have always been important in Erickson's novels, but they are works of fiction, you cannot truly map the real world because the real world is solipsistic, a moral landscape shaped anew by each one of us. So this distorted cityscape is a Ballardian reflection of the narrator's own inner self, but as much as the setting distances us from what we might term collective reality the events that are foregrounded upon it appear to be as close to a *roman à clef* as Erickson has ever written. Here, for

instance, we discover that Lauren and Sally, the ill-treated heroines of *Days Between Stations* and *Arc d'X* respectively, are both ill-treated former girlfriends of 'Steve Erickson'. And this 'Steve Erickson' – like his creator a sometime film reviewer for an alternative newspaper – writes a review of a film that doesn't exist, made by Adolphe Sarre, the silent film director who featured in *Days Between Stations*. Then, he overhears people talking about the film he invented as if they had seen it: his fiction acquires solidity, and one begins to wonder how much the author is lending the solidity of his real life the insubstantiality of fiction.

As the title suggests, this is a novel about memory. The amnesiascope itself is a sculpture created by one of the narrator's girlfriends, a dish intended to project forgetfulness. But the more the narrator himself seeks forgetting, he finds his past intruding more and more to shape his world. Or rather, the moral choices he made or failed to make, for during the course of the novel he finds himself forced to make a series of moral decisions that recall his past. His paper's editorial freedom is under threat from its owner, should he stand by his principles and resign? He rescues a teenage prostitute from a flood – another way in which the landscape is distorted – and finds her taking over his life in a dilapidated apartment building. He becomes involved in writing a curious semi-pornographic film (Banning Jainlight in *Tours of the Black Clock* was also a pornographer) but the quest for a leading lady takes him into a threatening moral twilight which ends in suicide. And everywhere remembering and forgetting form the twin poles of this moral globe.

Amnesiascope is an uncomfortable comedy, but as always there is a mythic power underlying Erickson's shattering vision and sometimes awkward prose which makes this a forceful and involving book. Yet at the same time the sense of closure is so strong, the confessional mode (emphasised by the only first-person narrator in any of Erickson's fiction) so convincing, that the whole book has a air of finality. It is as if, in his novels, Erickson has mined his own life so completely that the pits have fallen in and the working become exposed to the light. One wonders what else is left to be extracted for any future novels.

Diana Wynne Jones

A Sudden Wild Magic

Gollancz, 1996, 380pp, £15.99

Reviewed by Andrew M. Butler

For some reason I missed out on Diana Wynne Jones as a child, although I remember my brother reading *The Ogre Downstairs*. It was not until my early twenties that, prompted by wiser heads, I followed suit. Her books mixed real worlds with fantasy ones, alien beings with evil

relatives, convoluted plots with a real narrative drive and, most obviously, fantasy with science fiction. Genre boundaries I'd always seen as strictly demarcated, and perhaps still do, were muddled beyond recognition.

Another genre boundary must be taken into account, that of adult and non-adult writing. Whilst occasionally Jones's novels may slip into the sf and fantasy sections, on the whole one has to make a special effort to remember to look into the children's or teenage sections of one's local

book emporium to find her titles. Perhaps figuring that occasionally the mountain has to go to Mohammed, Jones has written a novel for adults. (This is in fact her second adult book, she wrote a non-genre novel before her first children's book). Gollancz are to be commended for publishing *A Sudden Wild Magic*, but it must be noted that the Avon edition appeared in America in 1992 (and came 13th in the fantasy section of the 1993 *Locus* Poll).

Initially, the concept behind the novel is not promising: the wind which mysteriously scattered the Spanish Armada, and the failure of anyone to invade Britain after 1066, is explained through the efforts of a secret organisation of mages. This sub-von Daniken premise is swiftly eclipsed by the mechanics of the crisis facing Britain and humanity: a city named Arth, from a parallel dimension, is stealing Earth technology and distracting Earth mages with problems such as global warming. Aware at last of their plight, the mages plan to infiltrate and destabilise Arth, and prevent further interference.

This is familiar Jones territory: the magic of fantasy mingled with the technology of sf, parallel worlds, Earth being viewed from alien eyes, eccentric old women and troublesome relatives. It could perhaps be distinguished from her work aimed at younger age groups by word count and the more stream-lined plot. She is freer in her subject matter: the inhabitants of Arth are all male and the taskforce sent to seduce them consists of both females and gay males. It is difficult to see this being allowed in a young adult book or anything aimed at a pre-teen audience. But for reasons which can be explained in plot terms, these male characters are killed off before they have a chance to

really get involved in the action.

This has the additional problem of limiting the appearances of other characters. Mark Lister, a mage who works in computers, is the central character of the early chapters. As the book progresses, we see him through the eyes of the other, female characters, then he seems to disappear for quite a while – he has to remain separate from some characters to remain alive and from others to build suspense.

There is a large cast, and some of them we barely meet – a shame, as Jones draws fine characters. The increasing number of settings, and the way characters move between them, can also be distracting, some characters seem to shift worlds between chapters while others are lost in loose ends. The resolution of it all, when it comes, is perhaps a little too swift and neat. It owes just a little to *The Wizard of Oz*, and is a classic example of the way Jones can pleasurably pull the carpet from under her readers' feet.

Yet I feel most of my carpings are edging toward the unjust: it's not a bad novel by any means. Indeed it is gripping, moving and amusing by turns, like Jones's best work. Except I don't really feel that it is her best work; I get the sense that she is holding back. It doesn't have the sheer magic and relevance and meaningfulness of her work for younger audiences. I've no doubt that she can compete with the best of British writers, and could turn out an adult magnum opus, but in the meantime I recommend a trip to other sections of the bookshop to seek out the brilliance of the Chrestomanci sequence, the sheer horror of *The Time of the Ghost* and the rest of her work.

Katharine Kerr & Mark Kreighbaum *Palace*
Voyager, 1996, 437pp, £16.99

Reviewed by Helen McNabb

The front cover says this is a novel of the Pinch by the author of the Devery series, which is true enough, but it is very different from the Devery series. This is not a fantasy based on magic in a sword-and-sorcery land; which is not to decry the Devery books, which I enjoy, but to point out that if anyone is expecting a clone of those stories that is not what they will find.

It is set in a world ruled by media involvement: everyone votes on everything, popularity ratings in the media are essential for the ruler to rule. Most people are born into guilds, and Rico is brought up in the Cyberguild, for which his genetic make-up makes him suitable. Genetic typing is crucially important to the influential families in this world, while technology is controlled by Artificial Intelligences which do not operate as well as they once did, though we don't find out why. We only find out about the world as the characters do – as Vida learns how the Palace works, so does the reader – which can be confusing at the beginning though it makes for a better story. What is

revealed is revealed naturally.

The story follows various main characters. One of these is Vi Kata, a member of the race called Lep, who is an assassin out to kill Arno, a member of the Cyberguild, and Vida who lives in an expensive brothel in the Pleasure Sect. We also follow Vida herself, and Arno's cousin Rico who is also a member of the Cyberguild. As the plot lines intertwine it makes for exciting reading, though a number of the plot lines reach no conclusion in this book leaving a tantalising wait for the next volume in the series.

The Pinch is a sector of space left isolated when the main jump gates were closed thousands of years before, and much of the technology is inherited from that time. The alien society, its social structure and the stresses within the society are almost entirely believable: my only doubt is that it has been too stable for too long, hundreds of years I could accept, thousands I find hard to swallow. Apart from that quibble it is very well developed, and the reactions of the characters to their world never jars. The characterisation is consistently good, and the motivations of Vi Kata are as true as those of Vida. This is a really good book that I would heartily recommend to anyone who enjoys a well-crafted soft science fiction story.

Stephen Lawhead

Byzantium Voyager, 1996, 646pp, £16.99

Reviewed by Norman Beswick

Aidan, a scribe in the monastery of Canannus na Rig in Eire, is unexpectedly picked to join a band of monks on a quest to Byzantium where they will present the Book of Kells to the Holy Roman Emperor. It is a mission beyond his wildest dreams, but disaster follows. Their ship is wrecked by Vikings, he becomes a slave to a Viking family and though he gets to Byzantium it is as the unwilling interpreter of a headstrong Viking king on a wildly foolish raid. Next he becomes a slave to a Saracen ruler in North Africa where he falls in love, undergoes appalling tortures, is betrothed to a Moslem princess, loses his Christian faith and is ready to convert to Islam. Then another twist of fate returns him to Byzantium, then in the end back to his monastery where, after unparalleled experiences and dangers in the wider world he finally has to come to terms with all he has learned and the lessons for faith.

Though it comes from a fantasy writer, this is not sf or fantasy: there is no magic, no dragons or mysterious spells, no magic swords, nothing weird or mystical. It is an exciting historical novel by an author who has specialised in Celtic researches, and considering its setting in the 9th century, the lack of any mention of magical rituals, even among the Vikings, is rather striking. There is a colourful range of characters from different backgrounds and with different religious beliefs, but all are practical and rational in their view of the world. Religion guides their social interactions and moral decisions, but never gets in the way of their practical understanding.

The narrative is clear, uncluttered and convincing. Lawhead keeps the action moving while describing in sufficient detail who the people are, how they live and what they believe. It is not for the squeamish: dangers are real, limbs get lopped, tortures are appalling, grief bites deep. The collapse of Aidan's over-simple faith is well handled and I found myself turning the pages impatiently, genuinely wanting to find out what happened next. An enthralling read, then, well worth the time it takes to reach the final page with its hint that Aidan himself may not be a wholly fictional character.

Anne McCaffrey

*Red Star Rising**Bantam Press*, 1996, 335pp, £15.99

Reviewed by Helen McNabb

Another Dragonriders of Pern book: good news for devotees, but not the book for anyone new to the series because too much of it would be meaningless. The dragon series has sprawled from the tightly linked original books, popping backwards and forwards in time to gradually fill in the history of Pern.

This one takes place some 250 years after the colonists arrived on Pern and just before the second pass of the Red Star which brings the peril known as Thread. The Lord Holder of Bitra refuses to believe that the Red Star will bring Thread and so refuses to take any precautions against it. He also neglects to tell his Holders that they should be doing so, and the book mostly concerns the risk to others of a large area not being prepared against Thread and the actions necessary to deal with this. Some questions left over from other novels are answered – for instance: why they never went back to consult Aivas – and other parts of Pern's history are seen happening, such as the development of teaching ballads and the continuing development of the apprentice system.

The story cracks along at McCaffrey's usual pace. The quality of the Pern books is variable and this is not the best of them, but it is not the worst either, though there is a strong element of using the same formula in a slightly different setting. The characters will be familiar to McCaffrey's readers because they are very similar to the ones in other books: the goodies are good, the baddies are bad and there is very little in between. The impish pre-teen boy is back with a different name and the dragons are ever themselves. There is some confrontation of the homosexuality between green and blue riders which was skated over in the early books, and there is a bit more information on the sexuality of the dragonriders, but the characters are not convincing and I would have preferred to be without that sideline unless she had done it better.

It is a shame that McCaffrey has lapsed into a rut with the Pern books because they are becoming variations on a theme and the originality of the story and the ideas which gave the series its original strength has been lost. Anyone who enjoys the Pern books will be interested enough to read this one, but the writer is doing herself less justice than she should. She can, and has, written much better than this and it is disappointing to see her turning out such makeshift work.

Robert Silverberg

*Starborne**Voyager*, 1996, 291pp, £15.99

Reviewed by L.J. Hurst

There is a theory that says the size of the cast list of a

television soap opera will be in direct proportion to the number of broadcast minutes per week, because more plots are required to fill the time and more plots demand more characters. I have a theory which says, conversely, that a soap opera with a small cast must have a small subject

matter, and the plot elements will be proportionately few as well. If the traditional TV soap requires a street or market as its centre and constraint, there is no reason why any venue just as constrained should not provide the setting. BBC television's *Moonbase One* and something even less memorable made by Central TV for the ill-fated BSB satellite channel may come to mind as science fictional soap operas.

I say this because Robert Silverberg's *Starborne* is just as much soap opera as a novel such as *Peyton Place*. Silverberg's setting is the FTL starship *Wotan*, setting off from a tired Earth to find new planets on which humankind can launch itself with a renewed vigour. This tired society is not completely degenerate, unlike Michael Moorcock's *Dancers At The End Of Time*, in fact they are rather boringly like a lot of people today – just getting by. The hero is the unnamed YearCaptain of the ship, and the other two main characters are his current girlfriend, Julia, and the blind telepath, Noelle, through whom the ship remains in contact with the Earth.

The ship is slightly different from today's society in its freer sexual swapping of partners, though similar to Silverberg's earlier account of an enclosed society, *The World Inside* (1971), set in an arcology (tower block). In fact, the book is similar in more ways than one, including its being written in the present tense.

What is unusual about *Starborne* is its unbalanced structure – for a long time nothing happens. Noelle begins to lose touch with her sister and worries about it, but it hardly changes life on the ship. Then, about half way through, the ship explores its first habitable planet: two explorers go down and are seized by a psychic miasma, fear so great that one dies. After twenty pages the ship goes on to its second planet, vine-covered and inhabited only by giant worms.

That's all that happens to them physically. However, Noelle's problems with telepathic communication concern the party more, and in the end, without any evidence, the ship's party attributes the interference to ethereal beings who inhabit the no-space through which the ship is travelling. The last effort of the ship must be to contact

these 'angels'.

This ending makes *Starborne* very similar to Silverberg's 1991 novel, *The Face On The Waters*, which also ends after a voyage across unknown territory with its heroes facing a supernatural experience. And I found it then to seem just as much a weakness as I do now. I can't see how supernatural transcendence can be offered so repeatedly as a satisfying conclusion, it seems just as much out of place as it would in *Coronation Street* or *Knott's Landing*.

However, it does provoke some interesting paradoxes, and you might like to compare and contrast *Starborne* with Paul Davies's non-fictional *About Time: Einstein's Unfinished Revolution*, just published by Penguin. *Wotan's* communication revolves around the telepathic communication between Noelle and her twin sister on Earth. Davies (who won lots of money for a book about quantum physics and religion, the Templeton Prize) has a long discussion of the 'twins paradox', in which he shows that twins separated by FTL travel age differently, because time is passing at relatively different rates for them (ten years on Earth, is six years travel at close light speed). What this also means is that a thought which lasts, say, ten seconds on Earth lasts six seconds at FTL rates. Since Noelle and her twin Yvonne, communicate immediately (although with the interference they have to re-think, like a computer modem resending a signal which has been NAKed – negatively acknowledged), ten seconds and six seconds are being treated as identical in both places. This cannot be true – Noelle is experiencing Earth time while in no-space, with no suggestion that she is having to make sense of time compression or dilation. She does not hear her sister's thoughts speeded-up or slowed down – they are as her thoughts, and they cannot be.

I don't know whether *Starborne* ignores the science, and then uses transcendence as an easy plot element to tie up its story, though I do feel that the Davies book is an attempt to smuggle supernaturalism into natural science. What is interesting, though, is the way in which two writers on a similar subject cannot make their stories agree. It makes me very suspicious. Which takes us back to plots. Which is where we began.

Michael Marshall Smith

Spare HarperCollins, 1996, 305pp, £9.99

Reviewed by Paul Kincaid

Does the science fictional element in a book have to make sense for it to be science fiction? Shopping malls that are five miles square is a perfectly reasonable extrapolation from current trends – that such malls should fly is not only aerodynamically unsound, it doesn't make sense either as a mode of transport or a social need. Yet it is just such a mall, malfunctioning in the ruins of Richmond, that is the starting point for this novel – and as an alien incursion that sets up its own social dynamic, it works. In this new Richmond, the down-and-out survivors of the old, riot-torn Richmond have surged into the downed megamall and made it their own, but only up to a point. The lowest levels of the mall are now derelict, above them are the slums of dubious bars and petty criminals, and so on. Social standing and criminal prowess increasing the higher you go, until above the 200th floor you are in the exclusive domain of people so rich that normal standards of probity and criminality do not hold.

So the stranded megamall works as a concrete social metaphor. It also provides an ideally seedy set of mean streets down (or rather up) which Jack Randall, our latter-day Phillip Marlowe, must go. Randall is an archetypal character: a war veteran who became an upright cop when all around were corrupt, but in tackling

the crime lords head-on he was taking on something bigger than he could handle. His wife and child were messily killed, he took to drugs in a big way, burned out and eventually had to hide away. Now, circumstances have brought him back and he finds he has to confront the man he considers responsible for the death of his wife, then form an uneasy alliance with him as they face an even bigger threat. The tatterdemalion knight who has fallen from grace yet whose moral might somehow remains pristine is an overly familiar figure, not just from Chandler but from his countless imitators. And Smith does nothing new with the character, if this was a crime novel alone it would be too routine to notice. What makes it work is not what Smith does with the crime elements, but where he places those elements.

Yet where he places them is in settings that are as believable as fantasy. There aren't just the flying malls that defy logic. Randall hides out on a farm, not a run of the mill farm but a place where human beings are reared without any form of education or proper care. These are clones of the super-rich, there simply to provide body parts whenever the rich are unduly careless in their daily lives. This seems to happen with stunning regularity considering the pampered, bodyguarded lifestyle of the few rich people we glimpse. But again, logic isn't the issue here, for the farms provide a symbol of the darkness underlying this society, while the 'spares' are the pure innocents that prompt Randall to recover his manhood in order to defend them.

But as Randall finds himself coming up against the very people who created and exploited the 'spares', he finds his new crusade has its roots deeper in his own history. It takes him back to the war, back into the Gap.

There is a moment in Smith's first novel, *Only Forward*, when this cruel, bitter, balkanised Britain of the future is suddenly revealed to be the all too solid construct of a strange Dreamland. The Gaps fulfils something of the same role, an irrationality that co-exists but intermingles with the brutal and bloody world we know. In this case the Gap exists within the interstices of our reality. It is entered by following a cat – for cats are always on the wrong side of any door (the Dali-esque logic is appropriate). It was in the Gap that the war was fought, a hazy, crazy, drugged recreation of the Vietnam War – or, perhaps more appropriately, the Central American war between science and magic realism in Lucius Shepard's *Life During Wartime*. It is in the Gap that Randall discovers both the true brutality of his opponents and also the purity reflected in what may be the ghosts or possibly the souls of the 'spares'.

If all of this gives the impression that *Spares* is a moral fable, it is. But it is a very strange fable, written with the gritty relish of a horror novel and embellished with a body count that is far too high to contemplate.

If all this suggests that *Spares* is a farago of hackneyed characters in unbelievable settings, it is that too. Nevertheless, the book works. Partly because Smith doesn't care if you believe in his inventions or not, nor does he waste time trying to explain or justify them. He simply presents them, take it or leave it; and as backgrounds for the story he has to tell they work well enough.

But it works mostly because Smith is a superb storyteller, and he presents this tale with a relish and a vigour that are immediately engaging. The idiocies, the unbelievabilities only surface after the book has relaxed its grip on you. Whilst you are reading it you are simply swept along on a rush of incident and tension. Who cares if Randall is just an avatar of every Marlowe-come-lately when he has such a talent for getting himself into and out of sticky situations, when he has such a sharp turn of phrase, and when he provides such a stunningly clear moral light through such a breathlessly corrupt landscape? Who cares that megamalls could never get off the ground when this one forms such a spectacular backdrop for a cascade of murders and firebombings and kidnappings? Who cares that the Gap has about as much logic as any bad dream when it is so surreal, so vivid and so twisted that it sets your mind on edge. This is a book to race with, a book you don't really want to think too hard about once you have finished reading.

Guy N. Smith

Writing Horror Fiction
A&C Black, 1996, 108pp, £8.99

Reviewed by Steve Palmer

This is one of many 'How to Write...' books which, according to the inside cover, include how to write for the teenage market, for children, about travel and, good grief, how to write about food and how to write erotic fiction. ('First, get a life...')

I suppose there are, nowadays, numerous genres and subgenres that must be catered for, and I would imagine there are thousands of writers desperate for a leg up. This

(rather short) book is concerned with writing horror fiction, hence the 50's style shrieking woman on the front cover and the blue splotch that could be a hand or possibly a squelching amoeba from one of the author's fifty-plus novels. Is it a hand or is it a pseudopod? No, it's a dreadful cover!

Delving into the book, the list of chapters includes such topics as expanding an idea, characterization, the plot and ... oh, that's it. Thirty four pages on how to write a horror novel, the rest is taken up with how to find publishers, what to do after publication, the American market, the graphic novel market. Most of the book seems to have been culled from ordinary 'How to Write' books since there is

comparatively little germane to horror.

What little there is seems relevant enough, for example:

Sometimes a character is born before a book. I remember going to a wedding once when a man walked into the church wearing a black jacket, jeans, and a matching fedora ...

And:

If your book is set in a particular locality, visit that place, take some photographs and generally get the feel of the area. Collect as much trivia relating to the surrounding locality as possible ...

Some of the advice, however, is somewhat contradictory. Thus:

The temptation is to introduce yourself to the manager of the shop, or announce to one of the sales assistants who you are. Don't. It is extremely unlikely that they will have heard of either you or your book.

And yet:

Make sure that all the bookshops in your area know

about your book.

There are some curious conjunctions. For example, the section on Luck appears at the end of the chapter on writing American horror fiction, and you wonder if this indicates some personally devastating incident from the author's earlier career.

This book would seem to be aimed at the ordinary writer as well as the horror writer. A surprisingly small amount is relevant to horror fiction and much of it seems to be general information that I would imagine could be culled from the common sense of a reasonably intelligent person. Asking £9 for such a book seems a bit much considering (as a quick trip to any reasonably stocked Smiths's will confirm) how many 'How to Write' books there now are on the market. This one adds regrettably little to what must now be considered a genre of its own. It's quite a weird, self-referential thought that a genre has appeared concerned with genres: will a book one day be published entitled *How to Write How to Write Books*?

Melanie Tem

Tides

Headline Feature, 1996, 246pp, £16.99

F. Paul Wilson & Matthew J. Costello

Mirage

Headline Feature, 1996, 312pp, £16.99

Reviewed by John Newsinger

Melanie Tem is a fine writer, producing novels that both challenge and perturb, adding a chilling dimension of horror to the everyday. In *Tides* she takes us to a nursing home where a murderous spirit is loose, running amok among the disturbed, disabled, sick and elderly. The discomfort the reader feels at visiting such a place is compounded by the antics of the malevolently playful Faye who feeds off misery and suffering and death. This is a grim book portraying an unforgiving world where everyone loses, where survival is the best one can hope for and even that looks remarkably like defeat. In the end, we all grow old and die!

The novel centres on Rebecca Emig, the idealistic young administrator of the Tides nursing home. She is barely coping with her responsibilities which are eating up her private life, and this is further complicated by the fact that her father, Marshall, is one of the residents. He is suffering the onset of Alzheimer's disease, the victim of an everyday horror from which there is no escape, no salvation. Tem's exploration of Marshall's confusion is superb, an often moving account of a man losing his past, his identity – Rebecca's response is finely observed.

Marshall becomes aware that the spirit of his dead first wife, Faye, has come to *Tides* to reclaim her daughter and to entertain herself among the residents in the process. Tem introduces us to a remarkable cast of characters, all economically delineated and successfully made real, such as Alex, paralysed from the neck down:

Alex let his eyes wet with tears. He had no control over the emotional lability that commonly resulted from a high spinal-cord injury such as his; indeed the external manifestations – tears, flushed and contorted face, penile erection, unsteady voice – were no longer directly expressive of contemporaneous emotions. But he could control the use to which he put such symptoms, and in the decades since the accident he'd learned albeit unwillingly at first, that opportunism could be quite as effective as forethought. 'I'm so sorry to be a nuisance,' he began ...

Alex has found a way to turn his misfortune into an advantage and derives considerable satisfaction from the manipulation, the exercise of power over his latest nurse, Abby. His confrontation with Faye and narrow escape from death, saved by an involuntary bowel movement, is as blackly comic as you are likely to get. Alex is one of a number of masterly creations.

While Faye fails to reclaim Rebecca, nevertheless in this novel everyone loses. There is no victory, just a protracted holding operation until failure, infirmity and death inevitably take their toll. This is a powerful tale made all the more memorable by its setting among the old and the sick: Tem has produced a minor classic.

Mirage, by F. Paul Wilson and Matthew J. Costello is a far less impressive affair. A young woman, Sam, is in a coma without any apparent cause and her twin, Julie, uses a new technique for exploring her memoryscape to try to find out why and hopefully bring her round. The idea of the memoryscape is very cleverly handled, portrayed with accomplished skill, but the novel lacks any passion. The characters are cardboard, impossible to identify with or care about, and I worked out the villain around half way through. This routine novel is unlikely to have left any impression on my memoryscape.

Ian Watson

Hard Questions Gollancz, 1996, 288pp, £16.99
Reviewed by Stephen Payne

Dr Clare Conway, a researcher at Cambridge University, is invited to a Hard Questions conference in America. This particular hard question is *the* Hard Question: life, the universe and everything. We're talking quantum physics here. Meanwhile, the QX Corporation in America have built the world's first prototype quantum computer, Qua, and they have invited Clare to have a look at it while she's over. Now, the quantum computer is a Big Idea. The drawback with yer typical modern computer is that it is physically limited in the number of tasks it can carry out concurrently; with the quantum computer there is no such limitation, it will use each probable version of itself, to infinity, to complete the task. Thus a task that would require years of processing time, billions of iterations, can be completed in seconds – the possibilities are, literally, endless.

So Clare zooms off to America with her would-be lover, Jack Fox, in tow, to give a speech at the Hard Questions conference. Unfortunately, due to the spite of an ex-lover, she and Fox find themselves the target of unwanted attention from a loony Waco-type cult headed by a David Koresh-inspired figure called Gabriel Soul. Eventually they kidnap Clare, though luckily Fox manages to escape. Soul wants her to join them, so he exposes her to a cruel variation on the Schrodinger's Cat experiment in an attempt to subjugate her. But the torture affects Clare in an unpredicted way and, rather like Watson's *Death Hunter* where he realised death as a physical entity, the purpose here is as much to illuminate the reader, as it is to motivate the character.

Clare is soon rescued by a SWAT team and events start to pile up with a randomness reminiscent of 'At The Rialto'. Having jumped out of one frying pan, she just happens to be outside the QX labs when Qua is stolen. 'Don't touch that dial', we all cry as she reaches forward to switch the thing on... But she does, and it is as the reader predicts – for we are all observers in this.

This is a thriller about quantum physics and the mooted possibilities of the quantum computer. Variations on this science have been done before, most notably by Greg Egan in *Quarantine*, but Watson is a storyteller at heart and that's what we have here. The plot's dogleg in the last few chapters was anticipated by this reader, and I suppose anything labelled 'quantum' nowadays could be used as an excuse for any old rag and bones, but Watson is not that sort of writer and I felt the book did not suffer as a result. His writing may be conventional, but his ideas are certainly not, it's all big fun and highly recommended. Crap cover, though.

Todd Wiggins

Zeitgeist: A Novel
Gollancz, 1996, 320pp, £9.99

Reviewed by Andrew M. Butler

'Quentin Tarantino meets Tom Robbins', it says here.

Tarantino should be familiar to all here, by repute if not by his actual work – although, *pace* the reputation, *Pulp Fiction* isn't actually all that violent, with a body count of something like half a dozen, and some of *those* were off-screen. The narratives of *Reservoir Dogs* and *Pulp Fiction* were convoluted, disrupting the linear flow of time.

Tom Robbins is probably less well-known, a cult novelist who became a best-seller with his second-weakest book, *Still Life with Woodpecker*, a love story set in a packet of Camel cigarettes. He has quietly produced six novels in 25 years, stuffed to the gills with memorable and eccentric characters, and the one which provides a potential parallel to *Zeitgeist* (though one which is infinitely more moving) is *Skinny Legs and All*, a reworking of *The Incredible Journey* in which a sock, a can of beans and a spoon travel across America in search of Jerusalem.

As midnight and the millennium approach (as the narrator notes, a year too early, but them's the breaks), a prisoner awaits execution and a journalist waits to tell his story. A bisexual Welsh philosopher, an African-American hacker and anarchist, a lesbian martial arts expert and a crazed Jewish defrocked priest all have to leave New York in a hurry, with the cops and the media on their trail

(*Natural Born Killers*, perhaps?). Their stories are told in a series of flashbacks, along with that of the narrator, Venus Wicked, a call-girl. Along the way the four pick up a battered, silent woman who brings the sexual tensions between them to the fore (Wiggins seems comfortable with hetero and lesbian sex, but gay sex is discretely off-screen).

This is a violent book: Venus Wicked strangles one customer during sexual intercourse and is the victim of a vicious gang rape. This disturbing scene is trumped by an oral Bobbiting which turns the stomach without tugging the heartstrings; the same incident in John Irving's *The World According to Garp* is far more shocking. This also means that the twist in the plot is unsuitably telegraphed: since we are alerted to this by the blurb – 'Venus Wicked ... knows far more about this story than she's prepared to admit' – the surprise is minimal. Not that it would be a surprise to anyone who has read Tom Robbins's *Another Roadside Attraction*.

There are some interesting ideas in the fabric of the story, in its satire of contemporary America, but the fragmented nature of the portrayal sits uneasily with the road-movie plot. Mark Leyner does this sort of thing so much better in vignette form in *Et Tu, Babe* and *Tooth Imprints on a Corn Dog*. This book tries so hard to be manic and wacky and satirical that it trips over in the attempt. 'An explosive literary debut,' it says in the blurb – not one I wish to follow up.

PULP FICTION

Paperback Reviews edited by Tanya Brown

Brian Aldiss

The Secret of this Book

HarperCollins, 1996, £5.99, 334pp

Reviewed by L. J. Hurst

'Twenty-odd stories' is the sub-title of this book, but you might think them twenty odd stories, including the infamous 'Horse Meat' from *Interzone*. Although one or two stories are vaguely mythical, there is little SF and not much fantasy in this collection. Things tend more to magical realism.

Between stories Brian Aldiss has written a linking text, which varies in its clarity. One of the more interesting links includes extracts from his notebook, including this observation "To say what you think: not as easy as you'd think", and a lot of *This Book* proves it. That is partly because some of the stories read less as a complete story than as episodes from something longer. Even 'Horse Meat' - one of the longest items in the book - reads like an extract which loses a lot of its meaning because it seems to have been torn out of a wider context. 'Making My Father Read Revered Writings' and 'Sitting With Sick Wasps', which follow 'Horse Meat', but are nothing to do with fantasy, both show this. What Aldiss does in those stories, as in many others, is to cast himself into another nationality (Danish in the former case, Indian in the other), for reasons I cannot fathom. A Danish boy reads a good book, presses his father to read it, and discovers that his father is not moved. That's it. So why could the boy not be British? What is the significance of his nationality?

Maybe the answer to that question is *The Secret of this Book*. Or perhaps it lies elsewhere, because, as Aldiss remarks earlier, "Information has become a saleable commodity", but the downside is that some information is not saleable - "One sort of information without monetary value is personal information - that is, provided the person involved is not famous or infamous... Were you ever interested in an account of someone else's operation - however much you itched to tell about yours?" Oddly enough he does not go on to say, as fiction proves, that personal information about non-existent persons remains in demand. And surely fictional characters can be neither famous nor infamous? Or is that also *The Secret of this Book*?

Piers Anthony

Roc and a Hard Place

NEL, 1996, 323pp, £5.99

Reviewed by Graham Andrews

Most of Piers Anthony's Xanth novels fail what should be called the L. Sprague de Camp Test: "The mere fact that a narrative depends for its appeal upon humour doesn't excuse the author from writing a good story. The yarn still needs structure, characterisation, movement, narrative hook, build-up, climax, and all the rest" (from *Of Worlds Beyond: Advent*, Chicago, 1964, p. 76).

For the uninitiated reader, Xanth is an enigmatic world whose inhabitants work on a punishing schedule; it is located right next to Mundania (the sorry place where hobbledehoyos like you, me and Anthony himself live). I enjoyed the first three Xanths: *A Spell for Chameleon* (1977); *The Source of Magic* and *Castle Roogna* (both 1979). After that, well...

Roc and a Hard Place ('the nineteenth Xanth adventure') mixes up the once and future formula: cute title; non-stop puns; screwy dialogue; and just enough plot to get by. I've got nothing against puns - far from it - but I like them to come at me unexpectedly, one by one: not with all the predictability of a Perseid meteor shower. With humour, less means more. Read P.G. Wodehouse - or Raymond Chandler. And puns shouldn't be run into the ground, like so:

She [Metria] peered at the dots. "Just exactly what are you, BB brain?"

"I'm an angry punctuation mark: an irritated colon," the dots said, "and I am going to make you pause before you continue."

"How long a pause?"

"Just this: As long a pause as it takes."

"As it takes to what? To refresh?"

"I thought you'd never ask: As it takes to make you give up and go away."

"I get it! You're another challenge."

"Too much of a challenge for you: Give it up."

Metria tried to walk around the nasty colon, but it moved over to shove her into the moat.

And there's more... more... more... Xanth novels are now one incessant semi-private party which mere mundanes are welcome to crash - at their spellchecker's peril. Anthony makes eager use of his reader-suggestion list. From the Author's Note: "Notions have been coming in faster than I can use them up, and well over a hundred have been used here. I have mostly caught up on them through the year 1993, and used the majority for the first three months of 1994, but some still have to wait their turn..." (p. 320).

In *Roc and a Hard Place*, Roxanne Roc is being tried for... But why should I bother about the plot? Anthony didn't, much. "People who like this sort of thing will find this is the sort of thing they like" (Abraham Lincoln). That says it all.

C.D.B. Bryan

Close Encounters of the Fourth

Kind: Alien Abduction and

UFOs - Witnesses and Scientists

Report

Orion, 1995, 642 pp, £6.99

Reviewed by Maureen Kincaid Speller

If one is to believe a poll conducted by the Roper Organization in the United States in 1991, as many as 3.7 million Americans might qualify as probable alien abductees. The poll and its interpretation are considered to be highly controversial, but there is no doubt that alien abduction is the anomalous phenomenon of the moment, fuelled by the increasing tide of books on the subject, as well

as a plethora of films and cultural references. So, are people really being kidnapped by Small Greys and subjected to batteries of curious medical tests, are people somehow disguising their profound psychological experiences in tropes and devices drawn from sf literature, or is this yet one more symptom of what Iain Sinclair calls 'the millennial tremor'? Read C D B Bryan's *Close Encounters of the Fourth Kind* and you will most likely remain none the wiser.

Bryan, a journalist, attended the Abduction Study Conference held at MIT in 1992, and this is his personal account of the week's activities. Personal, as in he attended the various sessions and reports back to his reader on what was said, or as much as he could note down, and he also interviews a number of participants, researchers and alleged abductees; he even attends some hypnosis sessions organised by one researcher. However, it is very difficult to glean any sense of what Bryan himself thinks about the whole thing. He occasionally notes that he is not sure if he is convinced by a particular argument or story, but that is about as far as he seems willing to stray from the path of bland regurgitation. In fact, Bryan gives the very strong impression of being only cursorily familiar with the whole UFO and abduction phenomenon, so although he confidently trots out the facts and figures about early post-war UFO sightings and the Betty and Barney Hill abduction case in the 1960s and the saga of Project Blue Book, everything is invested with the same weight of importance, whether or not it warrants it. Similarly, although the conference was held in 1992 and the book is copyrighted 1995, Bryan, for whatever reason, has completely ignored the more recent furor generated by John E Mack, co-chairman of the conference, claiming that aliens definitely exist, and the controversial circumstances surrounding Linda Cortile's alleged abduction, supposedly witnessed by Secret Service men.

More than that, Bryan seems remarkably unwilling to engage with the possible theories as to what is really going on. In a chapter entitled 'Various Theories' he vaguely examines the scientific researches of people such as Michael Persinger and Kenneth Ring and looks once again at Mack's claims that this is a product of our cosmic expansion, but seems reluctant to stray into psychological and folkloric territory, or even to face the fact that some of the abductees might actually be faking their experiences. All in all, it's difficult to understand why Bryan is writing this book if he has no thoughts or opinions of his own.

To be fair, this book has a certain value as a 'popular' account of the conference, given that the official proceedings cost in the region of fifty pounds, and it's certainly entertaining if you happen to be aware of the 'behind-the-scenes' manoeuvrings in abduction research, but if you are seeking an introduction to the whole phenomenon, then Jim Schnabel's *Dark, White* is undoubtedly a usefully sceptical corrective to Bryan's bland lack of judgement.

Mark Chadbourne

The Eternal

Vista, 1996, 381pp, £5.99

Reviewed by Colin Bird

Another bland horror-by-numbers novel – I'm sure there must be a software package that puts these things together automatically. The story concerns a mysterious stranger who meets Annie, the heroine, on a train and begins to tell her that he knew Jim Morrison of The Doors. At this point, surely, most people would change seats: but Annie perseveres with the discussion, only to find that her travelling partner is one of those nondescript 'incarnation of pure evil' characters that populate these novels. He causes the train to crash, just one of a series of tragedies he has catalysed throughout

history. He decides to track down Annie after she survives the crash and a mysterious stranger appears to aid her.

It's a standard battle between order and chaos with the clichés flying thick and fast. Some of the overripe dialogue is good for a few unintentional laughs, but as soon as people start saying things like "The black river runs and never stops" I reach for my King or Campbell to remind myself how this sort of thing should be handled. *The Eternal* creeps into almost interesting quasi-mythological terrain with the discovery of the bad guy's true identity but it's far too late to save the novel from toppling under its own ponderous weight.

Arthur C. Clarke &
Gentry Lee

Rama Revealed

Orbit, 1995, 635pp, £5.99

Reviewed by Andrew Butler

In 1973 Arthur C. Clarke's *Rendezvous with Rama* was published, a classic Big Dumb Object novel. An incredibly large spaceship enters the solar system, is intercepted, explored, and then abandoned as it departs. One of the peculiar characteristics was that Ramans did everything in threes, and thus another two ships would eventually arrive. Everything in threes? I thought, Cue two sequels. And yet, whilst *Orbitsville* departed and judged and *Ringworld* gained both engineers and a throne, Rama peculiarly (and thankfully) resisted gaining a son or striking again or even meeting Abbott and Costello. Over the last few years, this situation changed: Ramans also do sequels in threes.

Number three is possibly not the best place to return to the Rama saga, but a prologue helpfully outlines the story so far, and if this does, as the title implies, reveal Rama, then it is possible to dispense with all that suspense business and cut to the chase. This initial sign, however, are not good: not only is this the third sequel, but it's three times as long as the original. And after the prologue the novel begins with the dialogue: "Nicole?", to which the only acceptable response these days is "Papa?" and a mild fit of hysterics.

So humans have hitched a lift on this huge spaceship and are heading for parts unknown. But their society has become a totalitarian one, and our hero scientist Richard has left, leaving his partner Nicole to be executed as a traitor. Fortunately, she is rescued, along with her family, and then can go exploring in the rest of Rama. They encounter an alien species, octospiders, who communicate in colours and have a sufficiently high technology to manipulate genes and invent organic machinery. These aliens have been imported into the ships just as the humans have, and appear to have been uplifted by another race. The interaction of these octospiders with Nicole's extended family take up the bulk of the novel, but the civilisation the humans have left behind is not so willing to forget them, and is spoiling for a fight.

Clarke's best known works deal with human encounters with the infinite: with the Overmind or with a black monolith, or, in a sense, with the mind of God. Humans are pawns in the games of higher powers, leaving the plot resolution as a *deus ex machina*. In *Rama Revealed*, we get two such. And somehow it all seems a little mundane. So much for the abilities of humans to sort it out; why bother with the can-do spirit, when God can sort it all out? Even the remarkable achievements of the octospiders are owed to an earlier species.

There are other peculiarities: a character returns to the humans from the family, and is described as being absent for more than a year when only a few months can have passed. A child is described as being no more than a year old, and a

few pages later (and admittedly a couple of decades) she is around four. The dialogue clanks awfully, and unnaturally, whereas the prose flows. And despite the invention, opportunities are missed. What is it like to be a child in an adult's body? How could a colour-blind human communicate with the octoposiders? How did the octoposiders learn to lip-read?

Overall, an old-fashioned good yarn, stuffed with the sense of wonder, of grandeur and of the sublime. One thing bugs me: the ship is sometimes Rama III, and sometimes the original ship refurbished and returned 'for the third and final journey'. Doesn't that mean that there's two more of the buggers left out there?

David Feintuch

Midshipman's Hope

Orbit, 1996, 361pp, £5.99

Reviewed by Tanya Brown

The cover of *Midshipman's Hope* – the first in 'The Seafort Saga' – lauds it as reading 'like a collaboration between Heinlein and C. S. Forester'. This is a remarkably accurate assessment.

Nick Seafort is a well-behaved, law-abiding – and regulation-quoting – midshipman on the *USS Hibernia*, out of Earth on a seventeen-month voyage to the colony of Hope Nation. Naval officers have to start young, to reduce their risk of contracting melanoma; thus, as in days of old, the midshipmen are teenagers, and Nick, the senior midshipman, has his hands full trying to keep them under control. It would, of course, be unthinkable for him to join in with their foolery. His career is too important to throw away.

The Navy of 2195 is remarkably like the British Navy of three centuries before; the same rule-bound life aboard, the same mild contempt for civilians, and the same respect for the traditions of the service. Of course there are differences; the grand, Heinleinian scale of the interstellar 'ocean', Nick's familiarity with Amanda (a young, female colonist travelling alone) – but, if anything, this Navy is more God- and regulation-fearing than Nelson's.

Tragedy strikes just when it's too late to turn back to Earth, and Nick unwillingly finds himself in command of the ship – a position that he's the first to admit he is unsuited for. Nevertheless, the rules cannot be broken. Nick must do his best to hold the crew together, cope with an onboard computer whose increasing paranoia makes Clarke's HAL look positively benevolent, and maintain the trust of the colonists – oh, and win the heart of the fair Amanda, of course.

This is a rite-of-passage novel, from Nick's fisticuffs with the quarrelsome Vax who subsequently respects him, to his acceptance that he can never be as perfect as his father would have wished, and his realisation that sometimes rules have to be broken and that he needs the courage of his convictions. Another four novels in 'The Seafort Saga' have already been published in the US; it'll be interesting to see if, by the end of the last, Nick Seafort has grown up. Meanwhile, the scenery is interesting, the alien is suitably incomprehensible, and while Feintuch's characters tend towards the two-dimensional, there are flashes of wit and some thoughtful exchanges.

Alan Dean Foster

*A Call to Arms: Book 1 of
'The Damned'*

Legend, 1996, 346pp, £5.99

Reviewed by Alan Fraser

This is the first UK publication, directly to mass format

paperback, of a book originally published in the USA back in 1991. Book 2, *A False Mirror*, is to be published here in December, followed by *The Spoils of War* in 1997. The long gap between US and UK publishing dates explains why the Soviet Union is depicted as still being around sometime in the future!

A Call to Arms is about the Earth becoming involved in an interstellar war between the forces of the Amplitur and the Weave. The Amplitur are a race of telepathic projectors who can control other species and thus force them into supporting their Purpose, which is to attain complete Galactic unity under the Amplitur. The Weave is a loose and perhaps reluctant alliance of races who do not want to be subsumed into the Amplitur, and who have been resisting for about a thousand years of our time. With the war going badly for the Weave, a scout ship is sent to our outlying region of space to search for sentient races who can join the fight against the Amplitur and stem their inexorable advance through the galaxy.

Who should the landing party first contact but loner New Orleans composer Will Dulac, using an extended Caribbean sailing trip to try and complete a new work?

The Weave have been heartened by analysis of our broadcasting output into thinking we are a very warlike and bloodthirsty race, ideal for combating the Amplitur. Wanting to keep Earth out of the conflict, peace-loving Will does his level best to convince the Weave party that this view is totally wrong, and we are really struggling to put war behind us and achieve world peace.

To prove his point, Will recruits a motley crew of misfits whom he thinks will be absolutely useless to the Weave. Unfortunately for Will, not only do his recruits turn out to be superb fighters, but the Amplitur arrive in Earth's skies with the intention of adding Humanity to the list of their subject races in the Purpose. Therefore, we're in the fight whether we like it or not, called to arms.

Foster is an undemanding writer, who has made his pile with sundry novelisations of film scripts and even computer games. Although he has in the past turned out a few gems like *Icerigger*, I have found most of his output to be well-written, but bland and uninvolved. Despite Foster trying to address more serious issues about the dichotomy of human nature in *A Call to Arms*, it still falls firmly into this latter category, and I can't really recommend it.

Mary Gentle

Golden Witchbreed

Vista, 1996, 476pp, £5.99

Reviewed by Kathy Taylor

Golden Witchbreed is one of my favourite novels and it isn't possible to do justice to its complexities in a short review. On its simplest level the plot follows the adventures of Lynne de Lisle Christie, the newly appointed Earth Envoy to Orthe. Read just as an adventure the novel is a smoothly written story with interesting characters and some decent plot twists. On a more interesting level the book presents the interesting theme of Christie's struggle to maintain the balanced tension between understanding of and assimilation into Orthean culture.

The true fascination of *Golden Witchbreed* lies in its depiction of this Orthean culture and the concepts and ideas within it. Orthean terms are frequently used within the novel and some of the concepts translate only clumsily into English. Although a glossary is provided in an appendix, I didn't feel it was needed, as by half way through the book I was thinking in the Orthean terminology.

One of the key concepts in the book is that of the telestre. Telestre means both land and family – and the

Ortheans see no difference between the two. It forms the basic unit of the Southland society. Each telestre is held in trust for the Goddess by the extended family which lives and works on it. The telestre is all-important and is the focus of the Ortheans' basic loyalty.

Each group of telespires vote into office their S'an who represents them at Court. From amongst the S'an comes the T'an Suthai-Telestre – the Crown. The Ortheans use the same word for game, challenge and Government, and much of the book is concerned with the 'game' by which S'an are appointed and by which the policy on the relationship between Earth and Orthe is determined. Added into this are some historical and theological complexities which I will leave the reader to discover for themselves.

It's not often I can recommend a book without reservation but *Golden Witchbreed* deserves a place on the bookshelves of all literary science-fiction readers. If you have not already had the pleasure of doing so I strongly recommend you read it.

William Hope Hodgson

The House on the Borderland

New English Library, 1996, 188pp, £5.99

Reviewed by Stephen Payne

From a desolate house in the wilderness of western Ireland at the turn of the century (presumably: the book was first published in 1908) to the summit of the universe and the cessation of time, *The House on the Borderland* is the tale of an unnamed narrator's journey into the awesome and spectacular geography of the cosmos itself. This is big stuff. True, it seems little more than a travelogue in places, where the protagonist remains an uncelebrated cipher and the only other human character, his sister, remains part of the narrative furniture, but this apparent simplicity is deceptive and to judge this book purely on its unconformity to the conventional tropes of the novel is a mistake – this is some breathtaking journey. It's a fabulous and extraordinary trip through the life and death of everything, a wondrous odyssey that comprises all of our dreams and *The House* (beautifully visualised by Jim Burns on the cover). Hodgson does not concern himself with the creation of *The House* or its purpose, yet it is the hinge upon which the universe of this book, the universe of both our imagination and our dreams, pivots. *The Borderland* is the borderland on the other side of the looking glass, a gothic nightmare that prefigures both the literature of Cthulhu and the movie special effects of the last three decades.

Sometimes we read these old gothic romances (if it can be described as such) with the cynical and tired eyes of the nineties. "Been there, seen it, done it," we say. Not this time.

Alexander Jablokov

The Breath of Suspension

Avon, 1996, 343pp, \$5.99

Reviewed by Mark Plummer

Alexander Jablokov might be thought of as an *Asimov's* writer. His first sale, 'Beneath the Shadow of Her Smile', appeared in *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine* in 1985 followed by a further eleven stories between 1987 and 1992 (by which point the magazine had become the less cumbersome *Asimov's Science Fiction*), and all bar two of these are included in this, his first collection.

The material is unashamedly science-fictional: artists reshape worlds and themselves in scenes reminiscent of Michael Moorcock's 'End of Time' series; a time-travelling cop hunts an alien junkie hooked on religion; the story of a

new Saint for the Outer Spaces. The two strongest stories are the last two in the collection: 'Beneath the Shadow of Her Smile', Jablokov's first sale, is set in the trenches of a First World War that has dragged on into the 1930s and 'A Deeper Sea' (1989 and subsequently expanded to novel length) tells of experiments into cetacean intelligence ending on a research station orbiting Jupiter. As you would expect from somebody with such a strong track record of sales to the best of the science fiction magazines, the stories are good, well-written, pieces. Take the description of the alien Qerrarriq in 'Many Mansions' (1988): 'He looked like the remains of some gigantic dinner party, and clattered when he moved.' Yet somehow, for the most part, they fail to engage; they lack that certain something. Jablokov is undoubtedly a fine writer of short fiction, and for those who don't read *Asimov's* this collection maybe worth seeking out for the last two stories, but most of the material contained in this volume doesn't have the spark needed to project the author into the front rank of modern sf short story writers.

Oliver Johnson

The Forging of the Shadows

Legend 1996, 596pp, £5.99

Reviewed by Vikki Lee

The Forging of the Shadows is a first novel by this editor-turned-author, and is the first book in the 'The Lightbringer' Series.

For seven years the city of Thrull has been ruled by Lord Faran Gaton Nekhron and followers of the God, Iss. Iss is the God of Eternal Light and Life in Death, so it comes as no surprise that the city is ruled by vampires and the undead. A foretelling, however, has revealed that this rule will change after seven years, and so it is on the eve of the big day for Thrull that this story begins.

Uthred, servant of the God Reh, and a priest of the flame, is summoned by his brother to Thrull. After meeting and rescuing an old man on the road, Uthred learns a little about what is going on in Thrull. Nothing the old man tells him, though, can prepare him for the nightmare that awaits him.

Jayal, a warrior, and son of the former ruler of Thrull, is returning to Thrull to seek the woman he was betrothed to before the city fell to Lord Faran. His memory and past blighted by magic, Jayal is on a voyage of personal discovery. As he slowly uncovers his own past, Jayal finds that his life is just one long, terrifying nightmare, and that nightmare is leading him inexorably to his own doom.

Thalassa, once daughter of a noble family, and betrothed to the Heir of Thrull, is now a whore and plaything of Lord Faran. Her only escape from her predicament is death; but the only death that being Lord Faran's plaything allows is the Life in Death offered by the God, Iss. Then, on the very night of Thalassa's impending demise and Thrull's liberation, a stranger arrives at the whorehouse, and all becomes chaos.

This is a dark novel indeed, with a sprinkling of well-drawn characters and bags of pace. The story appears to take place over roughly 24 hours from cover to cover, and the amount of action and twists in the plot, leaves the reader alternately exhausted and depressed. There is little to redeem the oft overwhelming oppression in this novel – people seem to be either nasty, or downright bloody evil – so it jars the reader when the only relief from this oppression is the vampiric undead themselves: the feeling that these shambling, decaying nightmares can only hurt you if you stand still long enough for one of them to bite you, is hardly in tune with the general nastiness of the other characters.

This story could have ended with this novel, but enough main characters escape Thrull for Johnson to continue, if

there is more story to come. Just where the story can go from here is beyond me, though. Although the book was a mildly entertaining read, this lover of fantasy won't be rushing out to buy the second book.

J.V. Jones

A Man Betrayed

Orbit, 1996, 504pp, £5.99

Reviewed by Vikki Lee

This second volume in 'The Book of Words' trilogy continues to follow the fortunes of Melliandra, the runaway daughter of the powerful Lord Maybor, and Jack, the eponymous *Baker's Boy* from the first book of the series.

Having escaped the evil intentions of Lord Baralis, Jack and Melli flee north into the lands of the Halcus – the ancient enemy of the lands in the south. Following an attack by Halcus guards, Jack and Melli are separated. Melli is sold to slavers and Jack falls in with a smuggler by the name of Rovas, and his family. Fortunately, from this point on in the book, Jack and Melli do not meet again, so the reader is spared the ongoing romance that bogged down so much of the first book.

The entourage that set out from Castle Harvel finally reaches Bren, and the political machinations begin in earnest. Baralis sets about securing the marriage of Prince Kylock to Catherine of Bren, whilst Lord Maybor does the same, trying to put Baralis' nose seriously out of joint in the process. The Duke of Bren, however, has a trick or two of his own up his sleeve. Aware of the political implications of Kylock's success in storming and conquering the East, he puts in motion a plan that should stop Catherine and Kylock from inheriting all upon his death.

Amidst all the tension and intrigue, the two hapless guards, Bodger and Grift, again entertain with their discussions on how to succeed with women (and even develop a very important role of their own in the run of things). Tavalisk, the Archbishop, continues to exercise his culinary expertise whilst being even nastier to his manservant than ever, and manipulating events that will eventually lead to world war... and him installed as Pope.

I was a little unhappy with the first book in this series when reading it last year, and thought it rather unoriginal. However, Jones is certainly improving as a writer and for me, splitting Melli and Jack up has enabled her to concentrate more on the meat of this series. I for one am really looking forward to the conclusion of this trilogy and feel I can now recommend it to you folks too.

Stephen King

The Green Mile 1: The Two Dead Girls

The Green Mile 2: The Mouse on the Mile

The Green Mile 3: Coffey's Hands

The Green Mile 4: The Bad

Death of Edvard Delacroix

The Green Mile 5: Night Journey

The Green Mile 6: Coffey on the Mile

all Penguin, 1996, £1.99

Reviewed by Pat McMurray

The Green Mile is a serial thriller, written and published in six parts of roughly 25,000 words at monthly intervals. This is not a new method of publishing – Dickens published several of his novels using this format, writing them as he went – but

it isn't common in the modern era.

In 1932, a series of unusual events take place in the cell block which serves as death row in a unidentified southern state's penitentiary. A complex web of evil deeds and miraculous events is to unfold, which reaches down to the present day.

John Coffey is brought to the cell block, sentenced to death for the brutal murder of two small girls. The Green Mile – the 60-foot stretch of green linoleum from his cell to the electric chair – awaits, but there's a lot to happen before then.

Right from his arrival, the Chief Warden of E Block, Paul Edgecombe, is fascinated by Coffey, and sees something very odd in him, setting him apart from the ordinary murderers that live on the block.

If I was feeling literary I could mention the obvious Christ parallels; the devaluation of life amongst all those who inhabit the Green Mile; the strong sense of the world as a place worth living in; and the way in which the front story, the writing of this tale by Paul Edgecombe in a 1990's retirement home, successfully and comprehensively frames the action in the past.

I could also go on to mention the occasional anachronism and infelicity, or the way in which the chunks of exposition – which are dropped in the text to remind you of what happened in the previous month's volume – slow the pace when *The Green Mile* is read as a single novel.

The story is well told and shows that edge of raw brilliance that occasionally shines through a King story. If read as six volumes you will forgive the rough edges; and if ever cut down to a single novel, it will be one of the best he's ever written, unless the edge of brilliance is edited out.

David Lines & John Abbott

The XXXX Files

Arrow, 1996, £4.99, 60pp

Reviewed by Mark Plummer

'The X Files meets Purple Ronnie,' says the Press Release accompanying the review copy of this book, 'Pulp Fiction meets Glen Baxter.' This small-format – 5 by 5 inches – book consists of 60 single page cartoons featuring alien 'greys', at home, at play, and pestering humanity. The title is presumably designed to establish a linkage with *The X Files*, something which will almost certainly boost sales, but this isn't an *X Files* book *per se*; it merely covers the same sort of ground. It is, again according to its news release, 'highly illustrated' and 'very funny'. The former statement is undoubtedly correct, although one might wonder what else are we to expect from a book of cartoons, but the latter is somewhat debatable. In the first place, the cartoons aren't terribly well drawn and... well, an awful lot of them just aren't in the least bit amusing. Then again, humour is subjective. Make up your own mind. Read it in a bookshop, which shouldn't take much more than five minutes, and decide whether you think there's anything about this book which justifies its five pound cover price for anybody but the most die-hard *X Files* freak who has to have everything with even the slightest connection to the show.

George R.R. Martin

Fevre Dream

Vista, 1996, 350pp, £5.99

Reviewed by Tanya Brown

At the 1995 Worldcon, George R. R. Martin – who pursues the dual paths of editor and author – said that, rather than stick to one genre, he preferred to write one or two novels which would explore that genre, and then move on. *A Game*

of *Thrones*, his latest novel, is epic fantasy; he has also written space opera and heroic fantasy. *Feve Dream* is Martin's slant on the vampire myth; the story of a Mississippi riverboat, its owner and its captain. Abner Marsh's career as a steamboatman seems to be over; the harsh winter of 1855 has destroyed all his boats, and his hopes with them. On an April night in the Planters' Hotel, the mysterious Joshua York makes Marsh an offer he can't refuse – a brand-new sidewheeler, bigger and faster and more beautiful than any other boat on the river. All that York asks in return is that his friends can travel free of charge. It sounds simple enough, and although Marsh is suspicious of such largesse, the deal seems straightforward.

Only when the *Feve Dream* is cruising the waterways of the Mississippi and her tributaries does Marsh begin to realise that the situation isn't as rosy as he had thought. Joshua's friends are an odd crowd; they only appear after dark. There are dark rumours of what York does alone, on shore, at the dead of night – and uglier whisperings of a curse upon the *Feve Dream*. And eventually Joshua himself "fesses up"; he leaves the boat during those unscheduled midnight stops at deserted timber mills and riverside houses to hunt vampires. Vampires like himself.

Only gradually does Marsh come to accept this; he's a practical man, and vampires are the stuff of old stories to scare children. An encounter with York's enemy, Julian – who believes that human beings are prey – leaves Marsh convinced that vampires are real: finally he begins to understand Joshua York's dilemma. York is trapped by his wish to make peace with Julian's people, rather than destroying them; some of those whom he has already converted to his cause speak of him as a messiah-figure amongst vampires – the 'pale king'. Caught up in a battle that he cannot comprehend, Marsh's pragmatism and knowledge of the river are tried to the utmost.

This is not a novel which concerns itself with blood and night alone; Martin uses the vampire metaphor to explore issues of power, sacrifice and degeneration; Marsh and York's journey into the 'heart of darkness' owes more to Conrad than to Anne Rice. Images of stagnation and decline – a weed-jammed bend of the river cut off by changes in the Mississippi's course, a filthy bar in New Orleans – are contrasted with the gleaming mirrors and marble floors of the *Feve Dream*, just as Marsh's essential honesty and honour offset the treacherous, amoral Sour Billy, Julian's human henchman.

Martin's interpretation of the vampire myth is subtly conveyed, and more convincing – scientifically and emotionally – than many. While he doesn't dwell on the act of vampirism, neither does he gloss over the everyday violence and danger of life on the river – exploding engines, bar brawls and the casual slaughter of slaves. As a historical novel, it has a convincing sense of place and time; as a horror novel, its sense of brooding menace and powerlessness is remarkably effective.

Paul McAuley

Fairyland

Vista, 99¢, 416pp, £5.99

Reviewed by Colin Bird

Paul McAuley's sixth novel won him the Arthur C. Clarke Award for best SF novel in 1995; it was his third nomination for the award. *Fairyland* is a richly-detailed near-future tale of a Europe radically altered by nanotechnology. Society devolves into a new hierarchy based around the science of genetic engineering – those who have control over the human genome are all-powerful, others eke out a living on the fringes, developing biological drugs and sex-toys. A whole

new underclass of genetically-engineered dolls are created, and some of these are given the power of reproduction and become fairies – a reinvention of the Frankenstein myth.

It's not a totally original vision of the future, although McAuley seems to place advances in genetic engineering and nanotechnology closer to our own time than seems feasible; as a research biologist, though, his guess should be as good as anyone's. But *Fairyland* works best as a fantasy – another alternate world story like its predecessor *Pasquale's Angel* – rather than as genuinely predictive SF.

The ostensible protagonist is Alex Sharkey, although a number of secondary characters take over the narrative at certain points. Alex is an overweight drug pusher (well, to be exact, it's psychoactive viruses that he pushes) who runs into Milena, a precocious child, in a still-recognisable future London. For the rest of the book Alex chases her through a radically different EuroDisney and into a chaotic war zone. The first two parts of *Fairyland*, set in London and in the feverish world of the Magic Kingdom, are by far the most effective, with the author's slick, luxurious prose a pleasure to read.

I'm less comfortable about part three, where the book seems to lose its way somewhat. The minor characters seem extraneous and the diffused narrative shows McAuley's temptation (like Jeff Noon) to be dazzled by his own fertile imagination. But three consistently inventive SF novels in a row is pretty good going, and *Fairyland* confirms McAuley's status as one of our finest SF writers.

Jack McDevitt

Ancient Shores

Voyager, 1996, £5.99, 397pp

Reviewed by Mark Plummer

On his farm in North Dakota near the Canadian border, Tom Lasker digs up a yacht. This is fairly remarkable in itself, especially as there are no significant bodies of water in the immediate vicinity, but it's compounded by the fact that despite circumstantial evidence indicating that the vessel must have been there for many years it is still in near perfect condition. Early theories that it may in some way be connected with some criminal activity – drug smugglers perhaps – go by the board when it is discovered that it appears to be manufactured from some transuranic element way off the periodic table and which seems to be remarkably resistant to wear and damage. As speculation mounts that this could be an alien artefact of considerable antiquity – the area was on the shore of an inland sea but this was ten thousands years previously – the possibility is broached that where there is one artefact there may be more.

Inevitably the investigators into this phenomenon begin to attract attention from all sorts of areas. We see the impact of this find on the local community as a small town suddenly becomes a tourist hot-spot, catering to hordes of journalists, scientists, the curious and, inevitably, the nuts. The search is widened, and another artefact of greater significance turns up on the land owned by the Sioux. The question of native American land rights rears its head: will this perhaps become another Manhattan island? And, throughout all this, the potential commercial implications of this new wear-and-tear resistant element begin to permeate the world at large, perhaps putting the reader in mind of the 1951 Ealing film, *The Man in the White Suit*. The revelations coming out of North Dakota suggest that this may be the most significant find in history. But is it perhaps the sort of information that mankind would be better off without?

This is a well-paced novel, details about the nature and potential impact of the artefacts being revealed gradually throughout its pages. McDevitt considers the impact of such

a find on all areas of society – commercial, scientific, religious – and sprinkles the basic narrative with excerpts from newspapers, books and television programmes to give a flavour of how the revelations are being received in the world at large. The idea of the alien artefact is certainly a popular one at present – look at the popularity of *The X-Files* – but McDevitt does not allow it to take over; it is the impact of such a find on our society that counts. If the book has a weakness it is the introduction of a number of 'real' people towards the end, something which is rarely successful in fiction, but this remains an eminently readable sf novel with an unmistakably 1990s feel.

Ian McDonald

Chaga

Vista, 1996, 413pp, £5.99

Reviewed by John D. Owen

I've long been an admirer of Ian McDonald's work, but it has often been hard to 'sell' his work to others. Partly it's because of McDonald's sometimes dense writing style, which I have always found splendidly lyrical. Partly it's because he runs in the face of publishing trends: he writes no series, no sequels, is different every time. With *Chaga*, maybe I'll finally get people to acknowledge McDonald as one of the best writers currently working in SF.

Chaga sets out like a piece by Ballard, with a meteor landing in Kenya. The 'meteor' reveals itself as an alien lifeform called the Chaga, which begins to colonise Mt Kilimanjaro, absorbing everything in its slow but relentless path. Other modules land around the world, and are recognised as connected with an astronomical puzzle, when two of Saturn's moons metamorphose, one (Hyperion) vanishing completely. These events shape the destiny of Irish woman Gaby McAslan, who sets out on her career in network journalism with a specific aim in mind: to visit the ever-growing Chaga regions, and to probe its secrets.

As the plot progresses, the whole tone of the story changes, as McAslan discovers the secrets of the Chaga and the people involved with it. The story becomes more Clarke-ish, and expands away from the paranoia of the early chapters towards an enlightenment, a marvellous unveiling of the nature of the Chaga.

McDonald's writing in this book is probably more controlled than in any previous works. His descriptive powers are still as good, his imagination as fertile, but he puts it more thoroughly in service of the story than before. His characters are rounded, more complete this time, too. *Chaga* is his best book so far, which means it is very good indeed. Detractors might describe it as *Rama* combined with *2001* but Clarke at his best is a great starting place, which McDonald progresses from beautifully. I hope McDonald breaks out of his own mould, and produces a sequel: I really want to know what happens next to Gaby McAslan in the Chaga, and her lover Shepard as he enters the Chaga's Big Dumb Object that has become a second moon of Earth.

Jonathan Nasaw

The World on Blood

New English Library 1996, £5.99, 361 pages

Reviewed by Steve Jeffery

Yes, it's a vampire novel. The cover blurb rather gives the game away: 'The enticingly erotic novel of modern vampires'. So, are we firmly in Anne Rice territory? Yes and no. Actually, we're a bit further up the coast, in Berkeley, California, to be precise. And what do modern vampires do in California? Apparently, they form themselves into twelve-step self help therapy groups in the basement of dilapidated

Church of the Higher Power (they do take the crucifix down off the wall first though) and encourage each other to kick the habit. Vampires Anonymous. "Hi, my name is Nick and I'm a recovering vampire". In a way, it's almost endearingly silly, especially as a lot of them seem to spend the rest of their time attending every other addiction therapy group going: AA, NA, MA, CODA, Overeaters... Blood is the drug. When you're trying to kick it, you tend to backslide into anything else that's going. Otherwise you work nights as a freelance computer security consultant, writing cheap vampire novels under a pseudonym, or get yourself a job at the local blood bank. Unless you're Jamey Whistler, rich as Croesus, and have a direct line to the Higher Power through your own personal Wiccan witch – called Selene, naturally – and a vampire cult on a small Caribbean island presided over by the redoubtable Nanny Eames, when such minor considerations don't apply. All that ready disposal income does help to grease the plot enormously, though.

It's not actually a bad novel; it's just that it scatters cultural references – from Anne Rice to the Grateful Dead – like confetti, is overlong by a good third of its tiny, crammed typeface, and veers between sentimentality, a bit of gratuitous nastiness, and prurient sex. Lots of it. In just about every possible permutation and combination. The overall effect of which is less erotic than as bluntingly mechanical as a Haynes manual. Today we have *The Naming of the Parts*.

Somewhere in there there's a reasonable enough story trying to get out, but it's too often smothered in trying to be all things to all men, or women, or vampires.

One for a rainy Sunday, a very long train journey or for confirmed addicts.

Ray Nelson

Virtual Zen

Avon, 1996, 220pp, \$5.50

Reviewed by Andy Mills

John Henry Koyama is angry at his superstar musician father when the latter commits suicide. "When a father is unhappy, how can he show his son the right way to live?" Horrified at the thought of taking over from his father in fronting the family company (not only was he a figurehead, but he didn't actually compose or even sing; it was all done by computers) and determined not to share his fate, John Henry runs away from home taking only a toy flute with him.

It's a struggle at first: his girlfriend flits off, he's hungry. But it seems the lad has a talent, and he becomes a virtuoso on the little plastic flute. He renames himself Basho Foster, teams up with two other young men, Yo and Fatso; they invent their own musical style. Wabi is indefinable, but its core is simplicity and truth. At this stage the trio are discovered, and their so far fulfilling lives change...

Virtual Zen is a little cracker of a novel. It's bright and pacy and whilst the general drift of the story (John Henry/Basho's discovery of fame and fortune, the group's rise, and his facing the fate of his father) could be predictable, in Nelson's hands it isn't; instead you're never sure in which direction it will swing.

Basho's world – one in which the nation states have broken up, and cultures homogenised – is sketched in sufficiently to give background and never allowed to impose on the human interest. Fresh, highly readable, and heartily recommended.

Christopher Priest

The Glamour

Simon & Schuster, 1996, 326pp, £6.99

Reviewed by Paul Kincaid

There are some stories which haunt their author, stories

which are re-written and re-written as if they are never quite right. *The Glamour* is one of them. It first appeared in 1984, but the ending was unsatisfactory so Priest changed it for the paperback edition. It was changed again for the American edition. Then came a putative radio dramatisation, and while working on the script Priest made yet more changes to the story. Now he has brought all those changes together and added a final polish: this Revised Edition is the result. Those familiar with the original Cape edition will notice most difference, as the ending differs quite radically; most other changes are a matter of a word here and there, a slight difference in emphasis, minor additions to update the setting (there are CDs and Apple Macs in this version). For the most part the changes seem minor; there are none of the wholesale expansions, additions and structural changes that, for instance, John Fowles made in *The Magus* or Michael Bishop in *A Funeral for the Eyes of Fire*; but in a work of such subtlety, where each nuance counts, the difference has an important effect on the colour and feel of the story.

The Glamour belongs, structurally and thematically, with *The Affirmation* and *The Prestige*; it is a novel which asks fundamental questions about identity and reality. Each of the novels presents one version of reality, then goes back to undermine that reality with another version of events. Each is built around a triangle of characters, their secrets, misunderstandings, rivalries and affections providing the motive force for the plot. In *The Glamour*, the triangle is composed of Richard, Sue and Niall.

Richard is a film cameraman who was seriously injured by a terrorist bomb and has lost his memory as a result. Sue appears, claiming to be a girlfriend he met during the blank weeks he can't remember. Richard constructs one version of events, including the tensions created by Sue's former lover, Niall; but Sue undermines this with another version, one which Richard finds incredible but which may be the truth. For the three are, in varying degrees, glamorous, they have the ability to be invisible. Invisibility is a physical manifestation of Richard's amnesia and Niall's alienation, a metaphor made solid for the way none of the three are really able to engage with each other or with society.

Coming after *The Affirmation*, *The Glamour* seemed weak in comparison, lacking the sheer, cold, hard, psychologically devastating punch of its predecessor. But the revision has worked. Now we can see how well it stands up to both *The Affirmation* and *The Prestige*; more importantly, we can see what an insidious and disturbing novel this really is.

R. Garcia y Robertson

The Virgin and the Dinosaur

Avon Books, 1996, 279pp, £5.99

Reviewed by Janet Barron

Our hero, intrepid time explorer Jake, is escorting eponymous palaeontologist Peg, into the untrodden Mesozoic. By the end of the first page, he has paused in his attempts to impress her with his 'calm professionalism, feigned indifference and rugged charm', momentarily stopped drooling over her gratuitously naked buttocks as she flits with wholesome enthusiasm about her work, and has begun to teach her English words to express reverence. 'Motherfucking.'

Yes, this novel has targeted its audience – someone who has never heard of Jake the Peg, is not female, and very likely isn't over twenty-two. Those who don't fall into this category should flip straight to page 59, since as long as motivation centres on Jake's attempts to get his leg over, the plot, characterisation and humour are stunted. Beyond this point, while characters never achieve great depth, good

unsullied descriptive writing, clear exposition, and fine action sequences deserve a wider audience. In the best section, Jake and Peg, returning to Home Period in stages with their precious cargo of data, experience a Mississippi Steamboat Ride dripping with historical flavour, and packed with characters as varied as a river-water mint julep, the sweet, the strong and the gritty. Neatly plotted, and served with a twist.

Back in the future, Jake has to deal with a rise and fall in fame and fortune, and is manoeuvred by corporate skulduggery into a perilous trip to the Pleistocene. Once in sultry prehistoric climes, company spies reveal their ulterior motives, and professors reveal their tits. Amidst carnage generated by rampaging Hadsaurs, Torosaurs and that short cousin of T. Rex, (no, no) Nanotyrannus, the final wheels within wheels dénouement spins to its close.

James Robinson, Peter Snejbjerg,
Michael Zulli, Steve Yeowell &
Teddy Kristiansen

Witchcraft

DC Comics Vertigo 1996, 135 pages, £10.99

Reviewed by Steve Jeffery

Graphic novels, the argument runs, attempt to stretch the boundaries of narrative and story in ways that the merely text-based novel can rarely hope to. It's a good argument, but the sad fact is that it requires someone like a Neil Gaiman or Alan Moore to do it. In the case of something like *Witchcraft* it merely sounds like special pleading.

Being largely unfamiliar with the form, I find it hard to judge something like this. What I can say is that something which announces itself as created 'for the spiritually and intellectually evolved', 'philosophically profound', 'artfully beautiful' and full of 'poignant analogies' had better be something special by the time we get to the opening frames of the story. And *Witchcraft* doesn't make it.

This is a collection of three DC Comics *Witchcraft* magazines from 1994, and bought together in a set of three linked stories, titled (in a startling burst of originality) 'Maiden', 'Mother' and .. well, the Other One.

Essentially, it's a down-the-ages revenge tale as the three aspects of witch and womanhood guide and manoeuvre the several reincarnations of their young acolyte Faith Armitage from the fourteenth century to the present day to avenge the insult to their Goddess and the murder of her priestess.

The storyline leaps about in confusing episodic flashbacks, linked by the three witches standing outside and observing each tale. The artwork is competent, but rarely more than that, and unexceptional, and the final plot turn is, in these post-Bobbit days, hardly shocking or profound. And those introductory quotes? Well, if I tell you they're from the director of *Wayne's World* and *The Beverly Hillsbillies*, you can make up your own mind.

Sharon Shinn

Archangel

Voyager, 1996, 390pp, £5.99

Reviewed by Lynne Bispham

On the world of Samaria, the twenty-year reign of the Archangel Raphael is drawing to an end. The Archangel-elect, Gabriel, must seek out his Angelica, the bride allotted to him by the god Jovah, and prepare to sing with her at the Gloria – if the Gloria is not sung, Jovah will destroy the world with fire and flood. However, it soon becomes clear to Gabriel that Raphael has no intention of relinquishing his power. Furthermore, his destined wife, Rachel, rather than being honoured to become his Angelica, resents the restrictions of her role, even to the extent of hating her

future husband.

What we have in *Archangel* is a variant on one of the more perennial themes in SF: the spaceship/computer which, having deposited its passengers/colonists on a new planet, is now viewed by their descendants as a god, and has become the figurehead of a religion – in this case a religion with Judeo-Christian overtones. This well-used premise of SF is, however, given a new slant by the vitality and skill of Ms. Shinn's writing, and is the background to a fast-moving, utterly engrossing novel. *Archangel* is also a love story – astonishingly, the author manages to chart the progress of the relationship between an incredibly handsome, yet arrogant, hero, and a beautiful, feisty heroine without any suggestion of whimsy or sentimentality.

Dan Simmons

Endymion

Headline, 1996, 600pp, £6.99

Reviewed by K. V. Bailey

In *Endymion*, as in his two previous 'Hyperion Cantos' novels, Dan Simmons uses Keats' poetic variations on Greek myth for their symbolic value, and (remotely) as plotting models. In Keats' *Endymion*, the eponymous shepherd, through many trials, pursues love and truth as personified in the moon goddess Cynthia. In Simmons' novel, Raul Endymion, a shepherd of the planet Hyperion, is required to find and protect young Aenea, daughter of Brawn Lamia and a cybrid clone of the poet Keats. She is to emerge from Hyperion's Time Tombs, destined to become the One Who Teaches, and consequently considered by the interplanetary theocracy Pax to be a threat to its hegemony. Father Captain De Soya is despatched to capture her alive as she emerges and take her to Vatican City, reconstructed on the planet Pacem after the end of Old Earth. He and Endymion arrive on schedule, but it is Endymion who gets her away in his archaic but efficient starship. (As 'Cantos' fans know, all farcaster portals – with their travel opportunities – had been destroyed to thwart the parasitic AIs.)

The rest of the novel is one long leap-frogging chase, Endymion and De Soya each compulsively determined to fulfil his Aenea mission. De Soya accurately anticipates Endymion's planetary moves, and in his Archangel-class courier is able to get ahead of and intercept the slower-moving ship – which, however, eludes him until its forced abandonment on the shores of the farcaster construct, the planet-threading River Tethys. Thence Endymion & co. voyage on by raft and farcaster portal. Yes, aficionados will be delighted to know that some portals still function. Those instantaneous translations from planet to planet in all their colourful variety are manoeuvres in which Simmons excels. The chase ends in unrevealing twists of loyalties and enmities, and – with further tasks remaining – permits happy anticipation of yet another volume.

Michael P. Kube-McDowell

Star Wars: The Black Fleet Crisis Book 2: Shield of Lies

338 pp Bantam £4.99

Michael Stackpole

Star Wars: X-Wing Book 1: Rogue Squadron

Bantam £4.99 388pp

Star Wars: X-Wing Book 2: Wedge's Gamble

Bantam £4.99 357pp

Star Wars: X-Wing Book 3: The Krytos Trap

Bantam £4.99 355pp

Reviewed by Mark Plummer

Despite the seemingly conclusive nature of *The Return of the*

Jedi – with the death of the Emperor and the redemption of Darth Vader – George Lucas always planned two further trilogies, one pre- and post-dating the original three films. The first of these is now, allegedly, in some sort of production (although it's unlikely that anything will appear before about 1999) but in 1991 Lucasfilms authorised new books continuing events beyond *The Return of the Jedi*. A massive teaser campaign for the new film, perhaps? Or merely a tacit admission that the final trilogy is unlikely to ever be made? Whatever, the last five years have seen nearly two dozen novels and collections published or scheduled, works which are designed to stand alone but also intertwine with the other elements of the *Star Wars* canon.

Most of the writers have elected to tell the story of the continuing adventures of three primary characters from the original films: Leia Organa, Han Solo and Luke Skywalker. Kube-McDowell's book, set twelve years after the third film, goes down this route. Most of the characters who survived the film trilogy feature but, as the middle book of a sequence, it draws heavily on its previous and subsequent volumes. It doesn't really function as a stand-alone entity, and readers of the first volume will, presumably, be able to make up their minds whether to continue with this one.

Michael Stackpole, in his *X-Wing* trilogy set two and a half years after *The Return of the Jedi*, avoids the major players. Wedge Antilles, a minor character in the first and third movies, now commands Rogue Squadron, a crack force of fighter pilots who handle all the most dangerous missions vital to the survival of the rebel alliance, specifically those that involve flying along narrow trenches and dropping bombs down small holes. Whilst the cast of volume 1 are largely new characters, many of them do seem somewhat familiar: a humanoid droid who talks too much; a smuggler who seems largely self interested but get caught up with the rebels all the same; a young farmboy from Tatooine called Gavin Darklighter. It scores few points on originality.

By *Wedge's Gamble*, the rebel alliance are preparing to attack the world of Coruscant, known as Imperial Centre. Here there is a role for Rogue Squadron, although it is as spies and secret agents – surely a rather peculiar use for crack fighter pilots. This does however mean that aerial dog-fights play a lesser role than in the first volume; just as well as they don't really translate onto the printed page.

The Krytos Trap (volume three of a projected four book sequence) sees the rebels in control of the Imperial Centre but inheriting a population where the non-human element are stricken by a deadly disease. There are political intrigues, spies, and a secret Imperial prison; plenty of surprises for Rogue Squadron and their friends – but probably few for the readers.

Stackpole's books are basic sf adventures. They are, by and large, competently written and reasonably self-contained but will inevitably appeal primarily to fans of the original films, who will recognise the areas where the books pick up on and develops minor passing references.

Chet Williamson

The Crow: City of Angels

Boxtree, 1996, 250pp, £4.99

Reviewed by Liam Proven

Losing a loved one hurts. James O'Barr lost his girlfriend some years ago to a drunk driver – a random, meaningless loss that is even harder to bear. He wrote out some of his rage and despair in the form of an exceptionally powerful graphic novel, *The Crow*, story about a young man, Eric Draven, whose loss was so great that he literally returned from the grave to extract revenge from the gang who raped and killed her. This was later filmed, starring upcoming

Hollywood star Brandon Lee, son of the legendary kung-fu actor Bruce. Brandon arguably had never received the success he had earned, although *Hard Boiled* received some acclaim.

The movie of *The Crow* received a great deal of attention when Brandon Lee was tragically killed during the filming of the climactic scene – a massive shoot-out – when someone substituted live ammunition for the blanks in the prop guns. Filming was virtually finished, and the grisly climax to an already dark film ensured massive success: when watching, you know that he really *did* die in there, although the actual footage was not used. This had a peculiar appeal to exactly the target audience of the film; it was enough to put me off seeing it for years, although when I eventually did, I was spellbound to the extent of forgetting the grisly subplot until 'that' scene – with lasting effect.

With terrific bleak, Gothic appeal, *The Crow* was such a success that a sequel was commercially inevitable. The book permitted no such thing: almost everyone is left unequivocally dead at its end, and O'Barr, who still has problems of his own, has written no follow-up. So Miramar Films created one out of whole cloth, hiring British director Tim Pope (previously known mainly for his videos for the Cure, especially the award-winning 'Close to Me', filmed with the whole band inside a wardrobe) to bring it together. David Goyer wrote a screenplay for the movie which is fantastical and unreal; again, the 'hero' returns from the dead to avenge his lost loved one, this time his son. This time, the tale is enacted in 'the City of Angels', presumably representing Los Angeles – but this ain't LA. The City lies on the mythical river Styx, and is a cartoon evil hellhole of a place, populated almost entirely by criminals, junkies and whores. The only link with the previous story is Sarah, a young girl that Eric and Shelly cared for in the previous story; when she grew up, she took herself and her guardians'

cat from Detroit to the City of Angels, providing the sole tenuous link to reality in the whole tale.

It's hard to apportion the blame for the mishmash that follows. In the film, it seemed likely that the inexperience of a director used to short videos was responsible for nearly two hours on almost disconnected vignettes. In the book, though, there's less excuse, yet it follows the screenplay slavishly, just attempting to amplify the effect and imitate the film's artful, stylised unreality with poorly-rendered purple prose. Whilst writing novelisations is surely no author's idea of fulfilling work, this one is blatantly lightweight, not helped by the assortment of quotes opening each chapter: he has apparently used an online reference library and searched for the word 'crow', interspersing these with lines from James Thomson's *The City of Dreadful Night*.

There's little overall plot; Ashe Corven and his son are simple, good people – apparently – although they live in this hellish city. Growing up there, the child should be used to violence, but he runs to investigate some gunshots, leading them both to their deaths. In a city ruled by crime, with no trace of power or order other than the drug lord Judah Earle, the killers are inconspicuously anxious to kill the witnesses. The reasons for Sarah finding and helping Corven are unclear, although less so than in the film – at least her role in the elder tale is mentioned. Then we are presented with a sequence of bizarre killings as Corven stalks his own killers. These aren't entirely without humour and passion, but the background linking the events is so tenuous that the reader really doesn't care what happens: while *The Crow* was something of a gorefest, at least it was an impassioned one, feeding on the revenge fantasies of anyone who has ever been wronged. *The Crow 2* (as it is conspicuously not named) feeds only the fantasies of the moneymen who sponsored it.

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